

Spring 2009

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### Recommended Citation

Chesnut, Mary Todd (2009) "Night Vision Goggles or Rose Colored Glasses: A Unique Perspective on Training the Library Graduate Assistant in Instruction," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 57 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol57/iss1/3>

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# NIGHT VISION GOGGLES OR ROSE COLORED GLASSES: A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON TRAINING THE LIBRARY GRADUATE ASSISTANT IN INSTRUCTION

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## The Problem

**“Historically, though, there has been a gap in the curriculum at many schools in the area of library instruction, which means that graduates are entering the job market unprepared for the instruction they may need to provide.” (Forys 2004, 67)**

A review of the course descriptions for the twelve ALA-accredited Library and Information Graduate Schools in the southeastern states identified that the majority offer only one or two elective course related to library instruction (see appendix). These courses cover topics such as curriculum design, learning theory, best practices for teaching, and information literacy strategies. Some graduate program curriculums do not offer specific courses in library instruction, instead including it as a topic in a broader course such as Academic Libraries or in conjunction with a school media specialty.

Since all classes devoted to library instruction are electives, many library students will graduate with little or no graduate coursework devoted to library instruction. The majority of Library Graduate Schools simply do not prepare future librarians to be classroom-ready as they enter their first library instruction position. Before an Education student is granted a teaching certificate, they must prove their ability to teach in the classroom through an intensive student teaching practicum. Instructional librarians are often simply schooled under the auspices of a “baptism by fire” approach, frequently bypassing the student teaching phase. There is a glaring deficiency in the graduate training of librarians hoping to become instructional librarians. Unless a librarian has the good fortune of being accepted into a program like the Association of College

and Research Libraries’ Immersion Program, or affiliated with a program that offers student teaching opportunities as a part of their coursework, it is likely they will be solely reliant upon instructional mentors, wisdom gleaned from books and library literature, or simply left to their own devices to prepare for teaching.

Since many current library positions (academic and public) include some component of library instruction, there is great need for additional training opportunities in the area of library instruction. All southeastern graduate programs reviewed offer opportunities for experiential learning through professional field experience, practicums, internships or graduate assistantships. It is in these environments that established instructional librarians can take the initiative to supplement the educational training for new professionals through workshops and hands-on learning experiences.

## A Solution

**“Practitioners are in a position to take over some of the responsibility for ensuring positive, worthwhile, professional experiences for the next generation of academic librarians by taking the initiative to provide quality practicum experiences for today’s library school students.” (Leonard & Pontau 1991, 29)**

As a 2002 graduate of Library School (who earned professional field experience at the university where I am now Coordinator of Information Literacy) I began my instructional librarian career feeling underprepared for the classroom. In 2007, a colleague (who also interned at our library) and I built a foundation at our institution to better prepare library graduate assistants (LGAs) for library instruction. This

framework serves to supplement what the LGAs may or may not have learned in their traditional graduate coursework and helps prepare them for the real world of library instruction. From the unique perspective of two librarians who were recently “in their shoes,” we created a manual and training module to orient LGAs for eventual library instruction in an academic library.

### **First Library Instruction Experience**

**“Librarians are not trained to teach...Yet many librarians today find themselves teaching in their first position, armed with lots of knowledge about the intricacies of database searching but with little knowledge about how to teach and who they are as teachers.” (Susan Barnes Whyte 2008, 50)**

Perhaps my own initial experience as a new teacher illustrates the plight of novice librarians. I was two classes away from completing my MLS degree in the fall of 2002, completing Professional Field Experience at an academic library for a semester. I had recently taken a Bibliographic Instruction course and learned techniques and theory related to teaching and practiced in front of my classmates. In my field experience, I met with the Instruction Coordinator and learned about their philosophy and style of teaching and observed a number of library classes by shadowing six or eight different librarians. I had perused instruction outlines prepared by the librarians and was familiar with the curriculum of many of the classes.

Two months into my internship, I was offered the opportunity to teach a few classes, because I seemed “ready.” I was excited at the prospect of providing library instruction. I had discussed my instruction outline with a veteran librarian, prepped for the class, and loaded a cart of books carefully selected for the class. I felt fairly confident about my abilities until five minutes before I was to teach my first class. My stomach began to churn, my sweat glands were working overtime and I felt like my throat was going to close up. I began having second thoughts, seriously doubting my ability to teach, and wanting desperately to flee the building. Somehow I survived, but I’ll never forget that

scary and intimidating first solo flight of library instruction. Six years later, I am the Coordinator of the Instruction Program and have taught close to 300 library classes. This first instruction reaction is likely typical for the novice instructional librarian and is to be expected. However, a foundational framework for teaching can certainly minimize some of the uncertainty and raise confidence in the classroom.

### **Changes in the Scope of Graduate Assistant Orientation**

**“...sometimes librarians do not do careful planning for the training program for the graduate assistants simply because they do not have the time, or because they think the students can learn gradually, “on-the-job” and a systematic training program is not necessary.” (Wu 2003, 146)**

Before 2007, there was no established training program for LGAs at our academic library. Instead, experience was gleaned solely through on-the-job training and patient mentoring from veteran librarians. The LGAs scheduled individual meetings with each member of the division to learn the services and responsibilities of each area, and then shadowed librarians for several months at various services (desk, consultations, instruction, and email reference). After this immersion into the program, they begin filling some desk and consultation slots and worked with individual librarians on special projects. With the exception of a select few, most graduate assistants did not advance further than observing instruction classes.

In the fall of 2007, our academic library hired five graduate assistants, with four assigned to the Research & Instructional Services Division. Since our division consisted of thirteen people (11 library faculty and 2 staff) the addition of four LGAs was substantial. In the past, our division had employed only one LGA at a time. Additionally, a new philosophy was established within the division that sought to bolster the experience for LGAs by offering education and mentoring opportunities within the academic culture. This signaled a departure from employing graduate assistants primarily as

laborers to fill gaps in our service areas. To support this philosophical shift, LGAs were invited to attend all weekly division meetings and monthly faculty meetings; were included on the division and faculty listservs; and offered career mentoring opportunities. Contrary to previous intern experiences that had operated more on the principle of “sink or swim,” these LGAs were guided more closely through their internships and even granted the right to vote in meetings and play an equal role in much of the decision-making.

In addition to a new level of involvement for LGAs, an increased emphasis was placed on their training. The Director of Research and Instructional Services charged each area in the division with providing more in-depth orientation for the graduate assistants. The Instruction team was the first area in to create a model for training LGAs.

### **New Training Initiatives**

**“More reference librarians who have recently mastered the trade themselves should share their experiences with graduate assistants, interns, and new reference professionals—the often overlooked voices in the library profession.” (Spencer et al. 2005, 31)**

A formal instruction training program for graduate assistants was implemented for several reasons. Since there were four LGAs desiring instruction experience, it seemed a good idea to train them simultaneously. This insured consistency in training and appeared to be the best investment of time. Also, since my colleague and I were in the unique position of having interned in the department during graduate school prior to our employment, we had a personal vested interest in the project.

We began by creating a manual for new librarians and graduate students that highlighted the details of the instruction area to provide a foundation. This twenty-one page manual consisted of five sections: 1) Basic Philosophies Regarding Instruction/Information Literacy, 2) Basic Procedures for Library Instruction, 3) Information about Classroom/Teaching class, 4)

Scheduling Instruction, and 5) Basic Resources for Library Instruction. The manual provided a list of the instructional librarians, information about specific classroom equipment, information literacy competencies for classes, instruction policies, and other information a new instructor in the library would need before teaching in our academic library.

Next, we initiated the formal training process for LGAs. They had already undertaken an intensive introduction to Research and Instructional Services in their first few months by shadowing librarians at the desk and in the classroom. After this initial training, we began their instruction preparation. We scheduled a series of four Instruction Seminars in a four week period: 1) General Information / Goals for the Seminars, 2) Information Literacy, 3) Active learning in the Classroom, and 4) Managing One-Shot Instruction. In addition to the one hour seminars conducted by two librarians from the Instruction Team, we also required each student to research the topic for the week, share with the others prior to the meeting via email and come prepared to discuss. Each LGA was also required to meet with the two librarians individually twice in the four weeks to share concerns, insights, and questions.

The next phase offered the LGAs practical experience. They were given the assignment of team-teaching a mock English 101 (basic English composition) class for the Instruction Team, employing the techniques they’d learned in the seminar, with each LGA being responsible for an equal share of the class. Constructive feedback was given following the session.

During spring semester, the graduate assistants were paired with librarians with several options for collaboration: 1) the LGA assisting with class preparation (creating the lesson plan, pulling appropriate print resources and creating handouts or guides), 2) team-teaching with the librarian or 3) teaching the class, with the librarian supervising and providing feedback through the process. These decisions were based on the discretion of the individual librarians in conjunction with the LGAs. This phase permitted the LGAs to obtain practical classroom

experience under the safety net of a veteran librarian's supervision.

### Results/Investment

**“Everyone—students, supervising librarians, and LIS faculty—should remember that an investment in a graduate assistantship is an investment in the future. GAs will blossom into the reference librarians who will lead the profession in meeting the needs of patrons in the twenty-first century.” (Spencer et al. 2005, 31)**

The anecdotal feedback received from the LGAs seemed to indicate that they benefitted from the investment in their training and orientation for instruction. As they prepared to either team-teach or take a solo flight into instruction, they were better prepared than the average library student, and were aware that teaching a class involved more than just learning theory and curriculum plans. Their experiential learning in the library classroom taught them teaching strategies that library school could not as realistically impart. They learned practical classroom techniques such as recovering when the laptops won't connect, handling a belligerent freshman in the back row, or bringing life to an early morning class.

It seemed that the time investment allotted in the training would greatly benefit our academic library since we had hoped to retain the four LGAs for a second year. Unfortunately, budget cuts left our library with only enough money for one LGA. However, our return on investment was still high since the remaining LGA was assigned to the instruction area for fall 2008 with a heavy teaching load and will continue in the spring semester. Another return on investment will be a more seamless transition for future LGAs since a training foundation has been established.

### Benefits to Institution

**“The librarian working with the intern has the good fortune to see the profession through the eyes of someone new to the profession.” (Dalton & Oehlerts 2006, 43)**

While the focus of the training program was to

enable the LGAs to gain practical library teaching experience, there were unexpected benefits to my colleague and myself as we conducted the workshops. As the LGAs chose articles relevant to the weekly topics and discussed them via email and in our meetings, we were able to gain valuable insights from those fresh to the profession. Also, as the LGAs questioned us about how certain things were conducted in our instruction program, we were able to view our practices from a new perspective. Additionally, one of our LGAs had previous experience teaching in another discipline, and we were all able to gain beneficial classroom management techniques from him.

Another eventual benefit to the library involved time savings. Once the LGAs became comfortable with teaching, this allowed the librarians paired with them to pursue other projects. This was particularly helpful when LGAs could teach some of the popular (and plentiful!) freshmen core classes. This proved to be a win-win situation as the freshmen seemed to enjoy working with instructors closer to their age and the LGAs were eager to add a new fresh spin to the classes.

From a future outlook, creating the training manual and framework orienting LGAs to library instruction will be a practice that will serve us well. While the manual and training will continue to be a “work in progress” it will be in place for the next time we hire an instructional librarian or LGA.

### Conclusions

“They leave school with a theoretical framework, as well as practical experience, in the area of library instruction, and they learn firsthand what it will be like to work as a professional in an academic library.” (Forys 2004, 68)

As library graduate students select from the array of electives available to them, some will not be afforded the opportunity to enroll in a class dedicated to library instruction. Many of those who do opt for elective library instruction classes will likely learn theory and teaching strategies, but perhaps will not be presented an opportunity



for application in an academic classroom. Because of the lack of attention placed on library instruction in many library graduate curriculums, students hoping to embark on a career involving library instruction will be at a disadvantage. By creating training initiatives aimed at

supplementing traditional coursework for LGAs and new librarians, instructional librarians can help level the playing field for those new to the profession while likely gaining unexpected benefits.

## APPENDIX

### ALA-accredited Library and Information Graduate Schools in the southeastern states

#### Library Instruction Curriculum (as of January 8, 2009)

##### *Florida State University College of Information*

- LIS 5313: Design and Production of Media Resources – Techniques for designing, producing and evaluating media sources which meet specific instructional needs
- LIS5524: Instructional Role of the Information Specialist – The instructional role of the media specialist and methods of participating effectively in curricular planning, implementation and evaluation

NOTE: This school offers a Reference & Instruction Specialization  
[http://www.ci.fsu.edu/Graduate/Masters\\_Specializations/Masters\\_Specialization\\_Reference\\_Inst\\_ruction.asp](http://www.ci.fsu.edu/Graduate/Masters_Specializations/Masters_Specialization_Reference_Inst_ruction.asp) and also internship opportunities

##### *Louisiana State University School of Library and Information Science*

- LIS 7807: Information Literacy Instruction – Theories, techniques, strategies, and current practice for teaching the effective and efficient use of academic, school, public, and special library resources

NOTE: Offers field experience opportunities

##### *North Carolina Central University School of Library and Information Science*

- LSIS 5160: The Academic Library – Approaches to the organization and administration of college and university libraries, with emphasis on developing instruction

NOTE: Offers Field Experience, Practicum (LSIS 5620)

##### *University of Alabama School of Library and Information Science*

- LIS 542: Instructional Design and Development – Comprises a series of modules that cover the basic skills required to undertake instructional development. Materials needed to plan and prepare instruction, as well as exercises designed to upgrade interpersonal skills, are included. Designed for library-media specialists, supervisors, administrators, and others who assist teachers in the development of instruction.
- CIS 619: Seminar in Education for Librarianship – A study of the major issues in library education. Among the topics considered are theories of education, the university environment, special characteristics of education for the professions, library school faculty, students, and curricula.

- CIS 642: Advanced Instructional Design – A thorough study of the human and environmental factors that impinge upon the instructional design consultation process. Selected steps in the instructional design process are emphasized.
- CIS 690: Practicum in Teaching Library and Information Studies – Designed to give doctoral students interested in a teaching career extensive teaching experience under the direct supervision of one or more faculty members. The goal is to have the responsibilities of a course.

NOTE: Offers internship opportunities

### *University of Kentucky School of Library and Information Science*

- LIS 625: Instructional Services – Examines instructional services that libraries and other information-related organizations offer their clients to provide them resources. Attention is given to the nature of instructional services, the instructional needs of clients, information literacy, methods of instruction, teaching and learning styles, instructional design and the evaluation of students and instruction with the knowledge and skills they need to effectively use information.

NOTE: Offers field experience opportunities

### *University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill) School of Information and Library Science*

- INLS 745 (242): Curriculum Issues and the School Librarian – Considers the educational process, methods of teaching, scope, and sequence of curricular content in grades K-12. Examines the role of the library media specialist in providing access, instruction, and consultation.
- INLS 888 (308): Seminar in Teaching and Academic Life – Provides perspective on professional graduate education and LIS educational programs. Explores changing curricula and discusses ethics, rewards, and problems of academic life.
- INLS 889 (309): Seminar in Teaching Practice – For doctoral students currently involved in teaching activities; regular seminar meetings to discuss relevant literature and aspects of the teaching experience.

NOTE: Offers field experience opportunities and doctoral classes

### *University of North Carolina (Greensboro) Department of Library and Information Studies*

- LIS 672: Instructional Design – Components of the systems approach to instructional design

NOTES: This school is listed as having conditional accreditation. This school also offers a course in Methods of Teaching Computer Literacy and Computer Programming. Field experience and internship opportunities available.

### *University of South Carolina School of Library and Information Science*

- 741: Educational Services in Libraries – Application of principles and research in education to the teaching of library science to library users or practitioners in both formal and informal settings.
- 742: Curricular Role of the School Library Media Specialist – Role of the school library media specialist in integrating the school library media program into a K-12 standards-based curriculum including best practices, needs assessment, collaboration, instructional design, and

resource provision.

NOTE: Offers internship opportunities

### *University of South Florida School of Library and Information Science*

- LIS 5315: Instructional Graphics – Theoretical aspects, planning and production of instructional graphic materials. The theory of graphic communications. Interpreting needs for instructional materials appropriate for given behavioral objectives.
- LIS 6303: Preparing Instructional Media – Fundamentals of preparing and using audiovisuals as they relate to the communication process, basic sources of information in the general library; of bibliographical control of all communication media, with emphasis on those tools of most value to general reference services.
- LIS 6542: The Curriculum and Instructional Technology – The effective utilization of instructional materials as they relate to specific areas of curriculum in elementary and high school programs.

NOTE: Offers field experience opportunities

### *University of Southern Mississippi School of Library and Information Science*

- 525: Instruction and Assessment in Media Programs – The assessment of individualized styles and models of instruction in media programs and media centers. Requires for MLIS (AA)

NOTE: Field experience and internship opportunities

### *University of Tennessee School of Information Sciences*

- 577: User Instruction – Theory, strategy, design, and practice in providing instructional services and technology for end users of information and information systems. Includes practical experience.

NOTES: Practicum opportunities; field experience in school media setting. Also offers 595: Student Teaching in School Library Information Center

### *Valdosta State University Master of Library and Information Science*

- MLIS 7430: Information Literacy – An examination of the information literacy movement from its origins in library instruction to the learning theories and teaching practices that shape its current standards. The information literacy model used in academic libraries will be emphasized.

NOTE: Fieldwork opportunities



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