

# The Impact of a Graduate Assistantship and Optional Courses on Becoming a Teaching Librarian

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## LEARNING OUTCOMES

Readers will be able to

- question if MLIS programs adequately prepare librarians for teaching responsibilities;
- recognize the impacts a graduate assistantship and optional instruction courses had on an early-career librarian’s teaching knowledge and adaptability; and
- evaluate if MLIS accreditation requirements should be updated to include hands-on teacher training.

## Introduction

Michael Carlozzi argued in 2018 that “despite a proliferation of teaching responsibilities and an increasing recognition of the complex nature of literacy, librarians remain

unprepared to teach.”<sup>1</sup> Research supports Carlozzi’s claim that LIS students and early career librarians are not adequately prepared for teaching responsibilities. A 2016 survey of recent LIS graduates found that 19 percent of survey respondents reported a lack of hands-on experience and 16 percent reported a lack of instruction courses in their LIS education.<sup>2</sup> There have been several studies that surveyed the inclusion of instruction courses in LIS programs. Saunders found in 2015 that “the rate and content of instruction courses in most LIS programs have remained relatively constant since ... studies by Sproles and colleagues (2008), Ishimura and Bartlett (2009), and Detlefsen (2012)” suggesting limited instruction opportunities for LIS students.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, Courtney Douglass echoed this notion stating there is a “gross lack of opportunity for library school students to learn and practice teaching, course or program design, and assessment ... even though those working ... in the field of information are expected to plan lessons or programs, teach or train others, and assess or evaluate those programs and fellow practitioners.”<sup>4</sup>

I graduated from the iSchool at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) in May 2019 and entered the LIS field with what I now realize is extensive teaching experience compared to other early-career librarians. I was hired as a graduate assistant in the Research and Information Services (RIS) Department at the UIUC University Library and was enrolled in two optional instruction courses offered at the iSchool. Through hands-on experience in my assistantship and intentional theoretical development through coursework, I feel I have been successful within the field of library instruction as an early-career librarian. This chapter discusses the impact that an instruction-focused graduate assistantship and two optional instruction courses had on my development as a teaching librarian. My reflection will demonstrate the importance of having mandatory instruction courses with hands-on practice and learning theories in MLIS programs.

## Graduate Assistantship in Research and Information Services

As an on-campus student, I had the opportunity to apply for graduate assistantships to help cover the costs of tuition and gain practical experience. I applied and was selected for two graduate assistantships, one in the RIS Department (recently renamed to Teaching, Learning, and Academic Support) and one in the Digitization Services unit in the Preservation Services Department. My assistantship in RIS was most applicable to my current position and my development as a teaching librarian.

I held my graduate assistant position in RIS from August 2017 until May 2019. My primary duties in RIS were focused on helping patrons on the high-volume Main Library Information Desk and teaching instruction sessions. While on the Information Desk, I assisted patrons in person, on the phone, via email, and through chat services. I co-taught workshops for the library’s Savvy Researcher Workshop series and provided library instruction to English as a Second Language (ESL) graduate students. Additional duties included updating library guides and assisting with outreach projects. Piper Martin, Reference Services and instruction librarian, was my supervisor and she designed weekly

graduate assistant meetings to help us gain the skills and knowledge needed to become successful teaching librarians.

When I worked in RIS, all graduate assistants team-taught. Second-year graduate assistants acted as the lead teacher and provided mentorship to the first-year assistants. We had standardized lesson plans for the Savvy Researcher Workshop and ESL graduate library sessions. As a teaching team, we would discuss how we would divide instructional duties and establish teaching boundaries we were both comfortable with. This discussion also helped to establish support structures and a debriefing time after the instruction session. There were also opportunities for team teachers to revise Savvy Researcher Workshop lesson plans that they regularly taught.

Piper organized graduate assistantship meetings where we discussed our teaching and invited special guests from the UIUC Library, including Merinda Kaye Hensley, associate professor University Library, and Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe, professor/coordinator for Research and Teaching Professional Development. Merinda led a discussion about our instruction activities, including how to prepare for instruction, how to develop lesson plans, and how to reflect on our teaching. Lisa led us through her instruction studio over the course of a few weeks. In a 2019 presentation for the National Information Standards Organization's (NISO) Assessment Practices and Metrics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century event, Lisa outlined the studio as three one-hour sessions that focus on instructional design, creating learning outcomes, creating learning activities, designing assessment, reflecting on the process, and the importance of continuous improvement. Additionally, Piper reserved some of our meetings to discuss teaching philosophy statements that could be used when we applied for jobs.

My assistantship in RIS provided me with a supportive space to explore my teacher identity. I learned how to teach through the mentorship opportunities and hands-on experience available through the assistantship. Team-teaching encouraged me to brainstorm instructional strategies, support my co-teacher, try out new instructional techniques in a supportive environment, and gain familiarity with assessing my instruction. Piper spent a tremendous amount of time figuring out ways to support us through one-on-one meetings, teaching observations, reflective activities, structured discussions, and continuous learning opportunities. After I felt comfortable in my ability to teach through firsthand experience, I took two optional instruction-focused courses with Adjunct Lecturer Melissa Wong to learn more about the theoretical side of teaching and learning.

## **Optional Instruction-focused MLIS Coursework**

When I was in the MLIS program at the UIUC iSchool from 2017 to 2019, students had to complete forty graduate hours, which included two required courses: IS501 Information Organization and Access (four credit hours) and IS502 Libraries, Information, and Society (two or four credit hours). According to the iSchool, the two required courses should be completed in the first academic year and are “foundational for all areas of the field and provide a context for future coursework in areas of specialization.”<sup>5</sup> Students could choose the remaining thirty-two credit hours based on their interests and future career goals.

Coursework could be done in-person or online. I was an on-campus student and almost half of my coursework was done virtually.

My degree path included a mixture of courses in academic reference and instruction and archives and special collections. I initially wanted to be an archivist and took courses during the first year of my program that focused on archival studies. At the same time, I was learning about instruction and reference through my graduate assistantship. I altered my degree path to focus on academic reference and instruction once I realized I loved supporting learners through teaching and research. The two most helpful courses in my development as a teaching librarian were IS458 Instructional Strategies and Techniques for Information Professionals and IS590ELO E-Learning. Both courses were conducted online using Blackboard Collaborate and Moodle.

In the third semester of my program, after learning how to teach through hands-on practice in my assistantship, I took IS458 Instructional Strategies and Techniques for Information Professionals with Melissa Wong. The course introduced students to learning theories and instructional methods for library professionals (see table 9.1). I enrolled in the course because I wanted to articulate and then apply learning theories to my teaching. I took the course for two credits.

This course connected a lot of dots for me. I had already been teaching for a year through my assistantship and knew some of the information through practice. This course gave me an opportunity to learn more about the *why* instead of the *how*. I knew the *how* since I was actively teaching, but I did not know *why* I was teaching in a particular way. Through this course, I learned about the various roles of teaching librarians, the different instructional formats we use, and the different information literacy competency standards used in librarianship. I learned the importance of writing learner-focused learning goals and measurable outcomes using Bloom's Taxonomy. I learned different assessment techniques and when to use them. I also gained an understanding of learning theories, the motivations behind learning, and how that impacts teaching approaches. Melissa emphasized the importance of creating accessible instruction from the beginning using Universal Design for Learning. Lastly, Melissa discussed applying for instruction-focused librarian jobs and how to utilize the information from the course to prepare for our future careers.

To build on the theoretical foundation from IS458, I took a special topics instruction course focused on e-learning with Melissa. The course introduced learners to online instructional methods and best practices for library professionals (see table 9.1). I took the course for four credits.

I enrolled in Melissa's IS590ELO E-Learning course in my last semester because I did not have a lot of experience with online teaching. IS590ELO explored e-learning research, including different formats of online learning, learning theories, accessibility concerns, and creating accessible content. The course dove into evidence-based design of creating multimedia instruction using Ruth Clark and Richard Mayer's book *e-Learning and the Science of Instruction: Proven Guidelines for Consumers and Designers of Multimedia Learning*. This book focused on guidelines for designing e-learning, including multimedia, contiguity, modality, redundancy, coherence, personalization and embodiment, segmenting and pretraining, engagement, and examples. Melissa provided us with opportunities

**TABLE 9.1**

**Description, learning objectives, and assignments for two courses: IS458: Instructional Strategies and Techniques for Information Professionals (Syllabus, iSchool, Urbana-Champaign, IL, Fall 2018) and IS590ELO: E-Learning” (Syllabus, iSchool, Urbana-Champaign, IL, Spring 2019). Source: Melissa Wong.**

Course	IS458 Instructional Strategies and Techniques for Information Professionals	IS590ELO E-Learning
Modality	Online Synchronous	Online Synchronous
Credits	2 or 4	2 or 4
Description	The course introduced learning theories and instructional methods used in a variety of information settings, including libraries, archives, museums, online, and educational environments and provided an overview of theoretical and applied research and discussed relevant issues and concepts.	The course introduced a wide variety of online learning methods, including videos, multimedia tutorials, webinars, and online courses (including synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid models) with a focus on their use in libraries and information centers.
Learning Objectives	<p>Discuss the role of information literacy and instruction in a variety of library and information settings.</p> <p>Describe major theories of learning and their relevance to instructional design.</p> <p>Identify and evaluate multiple forms of face-to-face and online instruction in order to select the most appropriate instructional form for a particular audience.</p> <p>Select and use a set of competency standards to design instruction.</p> <p>Write student learning outcomes and an assessment plan for an instructional session.</p> <p>Design an instructional session that reflects best practices in instructional design.</p>	<p>Identify forms of e-learning and select an appropriate form for an instructional need.</p> <p>Identify three principles from cognitive science (dual channels, limited capacity, and active processing) and explain their implications for the design of e-learning.</p> <p>Identify three demands on limited cognitive resources (extraneous processing, essential processing, and generative processing) and ways to optimize these in e-learning.</p> <p>Evaluate e-learning lessons for their use of evidence-based practices.</p> <p>Use evidence-based practices to design e-learning.</p> <p>Apply accessible design principles to the development of e-learning.</p>
Assignments	<p>2-credit students: online forum posts, instructional design project, and peer feedback for other students' instructional design projects.</p> <p>4-credit students: online forum posts, instructional design project, peer feedback for other students' instructional design projects, and design and complete a teaching demonstration.</p>	<p>2-credit students: online forum posts, accessible document creation, screencast video creation, eLearning analysis, and semester-long group project.</p> <p>4-credit students: online forum posts, accessible document creation, screencast video creation, eLearning analysis, and semester-long group project, semester-long learning contract outlining midterm and final project focus.</p>

to read about each guideline, view examples of e-learning materials that either did or did not follow the guidelines, and discussed the impact of each guideline on the effectiveness of the instruction.

Taking into consideration e-learning research and evidence-based practices, we created learning objects using a variety of educational technology. Some of the tools we used included Screencast-O-Matic, Jing, PowToon, slide decks for tutorial making, word processors for asynchronous lessons, Piktochart, and Coggle. Melissa also demonstrated how to effectively use tools as synchronous check-in opportunities. She incorporated into her teaching built-in video conferencing features like chat and reactions as well as outside tools like polls and quizzes. The exposure to educational technology from both the student and teacher perspectives demonstrated how we could effectively use technology in a variety of e-learning environments.

## Continuing to Grow as a Teaching Librarian

I spent the spring of 2019 applying to academic reference and instruction librarian positions. I accepted a position as a research and education librarian at the State University of New York at New Paltz and became an assistant librarian with academic faculty status. I joined a team of librarians whose primary responsibilities include information literacy instruction, in-person and virtual reference, outreach, and liaison areas. I felt prepared to take on the duties of my new job and excited to get to know my new community. During my first semester on the job, I taught twenty-three in-person instruction sessions, worked more than 100 hours on the research help desk, and conducted nine research consultations.

I utilized the theoretical knowledge from Melissa's courses to design instruction and the hands-on experience from my assistantship to feel comfortable teaching in my new setting. Melissa's courses made me feel more confident sharing lesson plans with and seeking feedback from course instructors. A skill that proved especially useful during my assistantship was navigating relationships with instructors in the classroom. Learning how to teach in a team-teaching environment enabled me to better communicate beforehand with course instructors and encourage their participation in the session. I find that encouraging course instructors to participate while I teach allows for better integration of course themes and discussions into the library instruction session.

Melissa's courses prepared me well to adapt to online instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the pandemic, my online instruction was limited to a few course-specific library guides and virtual research support. When my campus shifted to remote work and learning in March 2020, I reviewed the teaching materials from Melissa's courses and shared materials with my colleagues. IS458 had a unit on multimedia instruction and IS590ELO focused entirely on online learning. In Melissa's courses, we created learning objects, including asynchronous lessons, screencast videos, screen-captured images, animated videos, infographics, and slide deck tutorials that were rooted in evidence-based practices and Universal Design for Learning.

I utilize the theoretical and practical knowledge from Melissa's courses to provide online instruction that began in 2020 and continues today. I create course-specific library

guides that incorporate more multimedia, including videos and screen captures. I teach synchronous sessions via Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, and Webex that include multiple means for students to interact with the content, myself, and their classmates by utilizing built-in chat and reaction features as well as online poll and quiz tools. Additionally, my colleague Anne Deutsch and I collaborated to shift the composition program library sessions to an online format. I recorded scripted screencast videos following multimedia design principles and created accompanying accessible worksheets for students to complete asynchronously. I was able to quickly create scripted videos and asynchronous worksheets due to the hands-on experiences from Melissa's courses. These materials are the foundation for a library module embedded into composition program courses beginning in fall 2020 and that remain in use as of spring 2024.

In the summer of 2020, I had agreed to step in for my colleague as the instruction program coordinator while she was on sabbatical from July to December. Despite being a new librarian, I felt prepared to take on the leadership role because I had the organizational skills and teaching knowledge to do it. As interim instruction program coordinator, I was responsible for onboarding a new librarian to the instruction program, overseeing the coordination of mandatory instruction for the composition program, serving as the point of contact for all library-related instruction questions and complaints, communicating with teaching librarians, and serving as the library representative on the General Education committee. Additional duties due to COVID-19 included facilitating online instructional support drop-in sessions for librarians and teaching online sessions outside of my liaison areas.

Beginning in January 2022, I assumed the role of library instruction program coordinator full time. It is an opportunity for me to dive deeper into what it means to coordinate a program and focus on my growth, not only as a teaching librarian but also as a librarian who supports and creates opportunities for professional development around instruction topics for my colleagues. It is also an opportunity for me to share my passion and commitment to high-quality instruction with the wider campus community and offers me a platform to advocate for student-centered instruction.

## Conclusion

I had no prior teaching experience before I started my graduate assistantship in RIS. My confidence as a teaching librarian and the practical knowledge I gained are because of my assistantship in RIS and are a testament to Piper's dedication to supporting MLIS students. My theoretical understanding and evidence-based methods are because of Melissa Wong's instructional courses and are proof of her effectiveness in training teaching librarians.

I do not think I would have been able to adapt to online instruction or take on a leadership role if I had not participated in hands-on instruction and received theoretical education in my MLIS program. I feel it is vitally important that all MLIS students take at least one hands-on instruction course. Michael Carlozzi articulated it well when he wrote, "We need a comprehensive core curriculum that attends to learning theory, instructional design, and assessment methodology and also provides practicum opportunities for both teaching and tutoring experience."<sup>6</sup> It is essential that the American Library Association

respond to the inequities in teaching librarian training through updated MLIS program accreditation requirements. Without focused instruction courses in LIS programs, MLIS students may feel instruction is not a significant priority or they may feel less prepared to take on instructional duties that are inherent in almost all librarian positions.<sup>7</sup>

## Notes

1. Michael Carlozzi, "Teachings in Libraries: Not an Elective Part of the Job," in *Re-Envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*, ed. Johnna Percell et al., vol. 44B, *Advances in Librarianship* (Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 206.
2. Mandi Goodsett and Amanda Koziura, "Are Library Science Programs Preparing New Librarians? Creating a Sustainable and Vibrant Librarian Community," *Journal of Library Administration* 56, no. 6 (September 8, 2016): 707.
3. Laura Saunders, "Education for Instruction: A Review of LIS Instruction Syllabi," *Reference Librarian* 56, no. 1 (January 2015): 13.
4. Courtney Douglass, "Making the Grade: Should MLIS Programs Prepare Information Professionals for Success as Educators?," in *Re-Envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the Future of Library and Information Science Education*, ed. Johnna Percell et al., vol. 44B, *Advances in Librarianship* (Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 215.
5. "Plan Your Program," University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Information Sciences, accessed August 12, 2022, <http://ischool.illinois.edu/degrees-programs/graduate/ms-library-and-information-science/plan-your-program>.
6. Carlozzi, "Teaching in Libraries," 209.
7. Dani Brecher and Kevin Michael Klipfel, "Education Training for Instruction Librarians: A Shared Perspective," *Communications in Information Literacy* 8, no. 1 (March 2014): 43–49.

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