

Perspectives: Librarian Teaching Identities are Constructed and Contextual

A Case Study of Academic Librarians' Teaching Identity Development Through a Community of Practice

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Article abstract

Drawing inspiration from our own experiences, we find that intentional development of teaching identity through a Community of Practice (CoP) may provide opportunities for librarians' growth as teachers. The way academic librarians think about teaching identity significantly impacts their effectiveness in the classroom, and the formation of a CoP can yield especially impactful supportive relationships, self-reflective practices, and pedagogical discussions. Through a social learning approach, we recognize the positive impact learning in community can yield; additionally, because of the role of context in teaching, we identify possibilities to address barriers to development of teaching identities. Our focus is on practical application for librarians at any professional stage to use elements of a CoP to cultivate their teaching identity and evolve classroom techniques.

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Librarian Teaching Identities are Constructed and Contextual: A Case Study of Academic Librarians' Teaching Identity Development Through a Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Drawing inspiration from our own experiences, we find that intentional development of teaching identity through a Community of Practice (CoP) may provide opportunities for librarians' growth as teachers. The way academic librarians think about teaching identity significantly impacts their effectiveness in the classroom, and the formation of a CoP can yield especially impactful supportive relationships, self-reflective practices, and pedagogical discussions. Through a social learning approach, we recognize the positive impact learning in community can yield; additionally, because of the role of context in teaching, we identify possibilities to address barriers to development of teaching identities. Our focus is on practical application for librarians at any professional stage to use elements of a CoP to cultivate their teaching identity and evolve classroom techniques.

Keywords: *academic librarians · community of practice · teaching and learning · teacher identity*

RÉSUMÉ

En nous inspirant de nos propres expériences, nous constatons que le développement intentionnel de l'identité d'enseignement par le biais d'une Communauté de pratique (CoP, de l'anglais « Community of Practice ») peut offrir aux bibliothécaires des opportunités d'épanouissement professionnel en tant qu'enseignant.e.s. La façon dont les bibliothécaires universitaires envisagent

l'enseignement de l'identité a un impact significatif sur leur efficacité en classe, et la formation d'un CoP peut donner lieu à des relations de soutien, à des pratiques d'autoréflexion et à des discussions pédagogiques particulièrement enrichissantes. Grâce à une approche d'apprentissage social, nous reconnaissons l'impact positif que peut avoir l'apprentissage en communauté ; de plus, en raison du rôle du contexte dans l'enseignement, nous identifions les possibilités d'éliminer les obstacles au développement des identités de l'enseignant.e. Nous nous concentrons sur l'application pratique pour que les bibliothécaires à n'importe quel stade professionnel puissent utiliser des éléments d'un CoP pour cultiver leur identité d'enseignement et faire évoluer les techniques de classe.

Mots-clés : *bibliothécaires universitaires · communauté de pratique · enseignement et apprentissage · identité de l'enseignant.e*

IT's intended as the ultimate compliment: “They were born to teach.” You may have said this about a favourite teacher or even longed for this praise yourself. However, framing teaching as a natural or inherent ability can add another layer of anxiety to the new instruction librarian’s self-doubt & impostor syndrome. Additionally, this perspective reinforces the lack of curriculum for pedagogy and classroom instruction in library master's programs.

Through our experiences as teaching librarians, we have reflected a great deal on teaching as a skill that is shaped by education, experience, and environment. We argue that library teaching identities are constructed over time and will discuss the effect institutional cultures have on our identities and approaches as teachers. We will explore the transformational role a shared Community of Practice (CoP) and New Librarian Training (NLT) played in the development of our individual teaching identities. We will address how our different library experiences shaped these identities, how they developed over time, and what made the CoP a particularly transformative experience.

Background

We—the authors—met and established a Community of Practice (CoP) while working as teaching librarians at St. Mary’s College of Maryland (SM College), a small public liberal arts college. Through participation in a CoP, we experienced a transformation of our identities as teachers, resulting in new approaches to teaching information literacy. Reflecting on our experiences through the lens of Nichols Hess’ 2020 survey results, we found several categories most relevant to developing our teaching identities:

- Supportive interpersonal relationships
- Motivating leaders
- Challenging colleagues

- Professional learning
- External feedback
- Library centric input
- Self-reflection (338).

We will explore how these elements shaped our teaching identities before, during, and after our transformative experience participating in a CoP for new librarians at SM College. Rather than prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching, examples from our experiences can help us examine the factors contributing to the development of a teaching identity through a CoP. In addition to our shared experience at SM College, our teaching experiences include:

- Pamela Mann (hereafter referred to as PEM): an information literacy coordinator and liaison librarian with teaching experience in a public K-8 school, a large community college (as a faculty and staff trainer), a private Ivy League university, and a large, public doctoral-granting R1 research university;
- Amanda VerMeulen (hereafter referred to as AAV): currently a library director with previous experience as an instruction and liaison librarian with teaching experience at a community college and a regional comprehensive public university;
- Jillian Sandy (hereafter referred to as JSS): an instruction and liaison librarian with teaching experience in a small community college and a public doctoral-granting R1 research university.

A Shared Transformational Experience Through CoP

SM College's Library currently has six faculty librarians, five of whom teach information literacy in the first year and transfer seminars—foundational courses in the liberal arts emphasizing inquiry and communication. This includes the three Research & Instruction Librarians, the Archivist, and the Library Director. The librarians who teach share informal information literacy communities and a history of collaboration.

In 2018 the SM College Library hired two Visiting Librarians with no prior teaching experience. To support the Visiting Librarians, PEM created a New Librarian Training, which provided an intentional, structured program to create consistency across the librarian-taught information literacy sessions in the first year and transfer seminars. The first semester of the program focused on teaching preparation for the seminars; the second semester focused on a variety of topics, including collaborative information literacy assessment, teaching identity, and pedagogy. From this pilot, a more structured Community of Practice emerged. Upon reflection, the SM College

CoP participants, in both mentoring and mentee roles, recognized factors that supported transformational perspectives on teaching identity.

Supportive Interpersonal Relationships

The CoP provided a structure for us to build relationships among librarians, allowing space for vulnerable conversations about teaching to happen. Because of the emotional labour involved in teaching, an environment where different perspectives and experiences are valued is critical (Evans and Sobel 2021, 116). According to one teaching librarian in Houtman's (2021) qualitative study, "Whatever it is that you're working on, the moment you have another point of view, it just makes the content so much better" (148). In the SM College CoP, our discussions provided opportunities to prepare for class sessions, understand classroom behaviours, and reflect on areas for improvement, with mentor librarians providing support in maintaining service levels and teaching outcomes.

The relationship building in the CoP had individual benefits as we learned strategies effective for the institutional context; in other words, the group shared cultural knowledge about teaching (Kirker 2019, 312). Additionally, the newer librarians had a group of peers to talk through challenges, minimizing some of the emotional labour of feeling that individual deficits are the cause of all teaching sessions that go poorly (Julien and Genuis 2009, 930).

Motivating Leaders

A successful CoP tends to follow an outcome-driven approach, as in the case of Queen's University's established learning goals (Lavery and Nasser 2019, 323). As the leader of the NLT CoP, PEM developed outcomes based on her experience teaching information literacy and participating in a First Year Experience committee at SM College alongside teaching faculty who taught the seminars. She was committed to balancing the needs of the new librarians, students in the first year seminars, and teaching faculty. This was reflected in the content and structure of the program.

Though the focus of the CoP was most immediately on effective teaching approaches in first year seminars, it was driven by big picture, pedagogical frameworks. These were essential and applicable to other teaching contexts, prioritizing intentionally inclusive approaches in the classroom. In particular, equity- and inclusion-focused approaches like feminist pedagogy helped to challenge existing structures of power in the classroom (Accardi 2013, 24). It was particularly beneficial that the other established librarians who teach contributed to the collaborative environment and to the CoP with their expertise.

Prior to PEM codifying the NLT CoP in 2018, she and AAV benefited from a colleague who served as a motivating leader. The instruction coordinator at the time created an unofficial CoP around information literacy pedagogy. The coordinator led the first assessment program in which PEM took part as a librarian. Additionally, the coordinator organized lunch and learn sessions where the teaching librarians discussed texts related to library pedagogy. Reading Maria T. Accardi's (2013) *Feminist Pedagogy for Library Instruction* for one of these lunch and learn sessions was a transformative experience for AAV. Accardi's book validated AAV's nascent teaching philosophy and helped solidify her own acceptance of herself as a teacher.

Challenging Colleagues

While leading three distinct iterations of the New Librarian Training, PEM encountered a challenging colleague in one cohort who did not complete assigned tasks, derailed meetings, and demonstrated poor preparation for teaching. Scheduled observations and debriefs did not have the desired effect to improve the outcomes of NLT meetings or library instruction sessions. PEM developed a remedy for the teaching preparation issue in later iterations of the CoP by creating forms for pre- and post-observation. The forms include pre-work for the librarian being observed to encourage more intentionality around class preparation.

In addition to challenges with librarian colleagues, there were difficulties with teaching faculty. The CoP did help support these issues, primarily for new librarians navigating faculty expectations. Though there had been significant dedication to creating buy-in for SM College Library's approaches to information literacy, there were faculty who still felt connected to skills-based bibliographic instruction that focused on database demonstrations. As a librarian in a public-facing role, JSS frequently used customer service approaches that were effective with patrons yet did not serve her well as a teacher (Meulemans and Carr 2013, 83). It was helpful to talk to the other teaching librarians about their experiences and to know they had run into similar obstacles.

Professional Learning

PEM used professional learning to design the New Librarian Training that structured the CoP. Focusing on preparing the new librarians to teach in the first year seminars, she used skills that she had developed designing information literacy activities for students to create a curriculum for new librarians. Her goals included situating the CoP approach to teaching information literacy in the broader sociocultural context, providing necessary skills for success at SM College, and preparing the participants for the job market. The structure unintentionally resulted in a CoP, as the goals

emphasized becoming an effective team with a shared understanding of our approach to teaching, embedded in the College's liberal arts ethos.

An element that was helpful for JSS, a librarian who had not been in a teaching role before, was the structured introduction to pedagogy. The class format included weekly readings on topics including the ACRL Framework, feminist pedagogy, and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Our CoP's experience with SoTL was consistent with those of Hays and Studebaker, who found that librarians who participated in SoTL pedagogy "saw to a greater degree themselves as a teacher than they did prior to their involvement in SoTL" (2019, 2). The CoP met to discuss pedagogical concepts as well as debrief on teaching challenges. This helped JSS to address some of the philosophical concerns difficult for a new teaching librarian to grapple with, such as troubling power dynamics, authority in the classroom, and reinforcing hierarchies. Additionally, it allowed space for practical application in class sessions, taking steps toward a balance between faculty expectations and achieving her own learning outcomes through teaching.

External Feedback

Feedback for the new librarians primarily came from colleagues who observed class sessions. JSS experienced significant anxiety ahead of these observations, but she knew it would be extremely helpful to have an external perspective on what went well in class sessions and what could be improved. As one participant in Houtman's (2021) qualitative study explained on the value of observations, "sometimes we can be too hard on ourselves and say, 'Man, I'm really doing a lousy job.'" (149). Concrete feedback helped, as librarians were able to provide specific examples of areas to address. Additionally, the observations helped JSS to begin recognizing some of the external factors limiting teaching that she could adapt to if not control.

The connection between feedback and relationship building through a CoP is critical; productive observations would have been virtually impossible for us without supportive colleagues and trusting relationships. Teaching observations can produce anxiety as they open librarians up to evaluation, including analysis of some of the subjective approaches to teaching. Because the feedback was coming from supportive colleagues, it was easier to understand the intentions without feeling defensive.

Library Centric Input and Self-Reflections

As a librarian new to teaching, JSS had received advice before to debrief or self-reflect following the completion of a class session. However, she found it difficult to make space for this in a productive way; she needed a lesson on teaching self-reflection! Discussing approaches to reflective practice with CoP participants, the benefits, and

how the other librarians applied this to their teaching helped foster more systematic reflections. Through the CoP and pedagogical discussions, JSS was able to apply a growth mindset to discussions of classroom approaches and self-reflection as an intervention.

What Was Transformational?

We as authors all identify supportive interpersonal relationships, self-reflection, and community as valuable elements of the CoP experience. Building relationships through the CoP was and is an evolutionary process. The more sensitive elements like receiving feedback through observation and sharing experiences of class sessions that have gone poorly were possible largely because of the relationship- and trust-building. JSS found this element especially helpful as an early career teaching librarian seeking opportunities to network, gain workplace experience teaching information literacy, and mitigate feelings of impostor syndrome.

For PEM, a transformational aspect was in accidentally developing a community of practice. Previously, she had not been in a leadership position nor a member of an intentional information literacy CoP “where learning is constituted through collective practices and focused on the development of a collective competence as opposed to individual competence.” (Lloyd 2005, 231). While she regularly interacted with the teaching librarians in a previous role, the interactions were informal and irregular without the affordances of a community of practice. She particularly valued the opportunity for shared professional learning and supportive interpersonal relationships.

AAV found the most transformational element of the CoP was an appreciation for her own knowledge and expertise as a teacher. She was able to accept that teaching as a librarian is different from teaching as an instructor of record but equally valuable, and found the validation to focus on conceptual approaches to information literacy in addition to skills. Most significantly, supportive interpersonal relationships and self-reflection have influenced her teaching identity. Supportive relationships among the librarians who teach allow for a culture that addresses the difficult parts of teaching as a librarian while challenging the idea that the role is deferential to teaching faculty. Self-reflection led her to push beyond task-based sessions to more concept-based lessons through experimentation and reflection about the effectiveness of the lessons.

Translating Elements of CoP to Your Teaching Context

In a teaching setting, you may encounter barriers impacting your ability to participate in or form a CoP at your institution. Based on experience and the literature, there may be ways to find CoP opportunities in external settings or to

apply some of the elements we identified in manageable ways. Given the importance of context for effective CoPs, we do recognize that, depending on the campus or work environment, it may not be possible to enact all or even most of these approaches.

Relationship Building

Several avenues for relationship building can yield support that may impact morale and your identity as a teacher. Colleagues in your department or library may be a natural first step; however, in some contexts, seeking connections outside of the library or institution may serve you better. When working in unsupportive environments, Kendrick's (2017) qualitative survey finds that "talking with others offered participants a powerful sense of emotional validation and helped reduce their feelings of isolation" (863). Additionally, van Lankveld (2017) finds evidence that an encouraging environment plays a role in teaching identity: "The work environment enhanced teacher identity when it was perceived as collegial and supportive. In these departments, teachers felt part of a team that emphasized the value of teaching and offered opportunities to discuss educational matters with colleagues" (330). Because we found the social learning element of CoP participation to be one of the most significant factors, we encourage relationship building as a priority to whatever degree is possible.

Finding Learning Opportunities

Without the structured learning environment of a CoP, it can be challenging to grow professionally and identify effective teaching strategies on your own. We have found learning opportunities through campus departments like the centre for learning & teaching. There may be workshops, training, or short-term classes that can offer some of the social learning a CoP provides. According to Hays and Studebaker's (2019) research, "Study participants' involvement with teaching centers helped expand their instruction skills and made them feel part of the broad teaching and learning community at their institutions" (4). Programs through centres for learning and teaching can support the critical CoP elements of relationship building, professional learning, pedagogical framing, and self-reflection.

Self-Reflection and Assessment

Assessment can be a tool for teaching librarians to learn about the effectiveness of specific class sessions; however, assessment must also include time to analyze results and self-reflect about changes to make next time. Erlinger (2018) notes that "assessment is an iterative cycle" and "collaboration is encouraged" (2018). Self-reflection helps us to identify successes and build upon these, and may be especially

pertinent if observations are not practical options for you. Depending on the level of institutional support for your approaches to teaching information literacy, self-reflection and assessment can help to explain and justify your learning outcomes. In settings lacking supportive relationships, self-reflection may also assist with evaluating your work context and drawing boundaries. To avoid some of the impact of burnout, it can be helpful to identify what work is possible for you to maintain given the available tools and resources. Making time for this can help you consider your teaching identity and values—for example, the elements that you are not willing to compromise on.

Conclusion

As none of us feel we were destined to teach based on natural or innate gifts, we found the formation of a CoP, formal or informal, encouraged the transformation of our librarian teaching identities. In particular, our participation in a CoP was effective to build supportive relationships, provide space for self-reflective exercises, and inspire structured pedagogical discussions. Even without a structured practice, we hope our approaches to a CoP help other librarians intentionally cultivate their teaching identity.

While it can be frustrating to feel ineffective in the classroom, it may be motivating to remember that accomplished teachers are not born; they construct their identities and practices based on the teaching context. In that spirit, let's reframe the ultimate compliment: "They were born...and since have developed an impressive set of skills and experiences that inform an effective teaching practice in context."

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