Five Voices, Two Perspectives: Integrating Student Librarians into a Science and Engineering Library

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Abstract

While there is an ample amount of literature on the topic of integrating new librarians into the workplace, there has been relatively little on the practice of integrating graduate library school students on the reference desk. Written by a team of librarians and library school students, this article brings together the unique perspectives of working professionals and students. Each year the Science and Engineering branch of University of British Columbia (UBC) Library hires a number of library school students as Student Librarians (SL). This creates a win-win situation whereby librarians are given release time to work on a multitude of tasks, while students are given the opportunity to gain valuable experience working in an academic library setting, learning from professional librarians and

building a network. The article begins with insight and advice from supervising librarians, including what they look for in a potential new hire. The discussion then moves on to include reflections from the student librarians in the areas of reference, collection development and instruction.

Introduction

Science & Engineering, UBC Library has hired library school students from UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS) as Student Librarians (SLs) to work on the reference desk for approximately the past ten years. SLs are hired in order to give librarians release time so they can work on responsibilities such as collection development, teaching, outreach, and other liaison activities, as well as other initiatives that take them out of the office. Perhaps somewhat altruistically, we also believe it provides library school students with a view into their chosen profession by affording them an opportunity to do the sort of work they will be expected to perform as professionals. As time has passed, it has become necessary for our SLs to branch out beyond reference work. In ten years, the science and applied science student and faculty population has grown significantly, but our library team has not. With three librarians to serve a very large population of science and engineering faculty and students, we now use the SLs for collection development projects, updating online resources such as subject guides, and teaching curriculum specific undergraduate classes in engineering.

There have been many papers published in the library literature on the topic of hiring and integrating new librarians into libraries (Abram 2009; Cox 2007; Hart 2000; Khan 2003; Newman 2003; Schachter 2006; Schachter 2009; Stephenson & St. Clair 1996; Womack & Rupp-Serrano 2000; Wu 2003), and specifically into science and engineering academic libraries (Beck & Callison 2006; Mitchell 2004; Tchangalova 2009). It seems, however, that the practice of integrating graduate library school students on the reference desk has not been widely discussed in the literature.

In this paper, we offer our perspectives on what the supervising librarians look for in a potential hire, as well as the unique perspectives of three SLs who were trained for 2009[1], and have been working on our reference desk, on projects and teaching for the past six months. Working at our reference desk also offers an added challenge. We have a combined Science & Engineering, Art, Architecture and Planning reference desk. While this sort of situation is less rare than it used to be, it can be challenging for practiced librarians, and extra challenging for library school students. Our SLs are cross trained; it is expected that they can help any science, engineering, art, architecture or planning patron *begin* their research in the appropriate databases, or with finding the appropriate monographs, with the understanding that they are only the front line. They have five librarians (three in Science & Engineering, two in Art, Architecture and Planning) who they can, and should, refer patrons to as soon as they are out of their depth. All SLs on the combined reference desk answer all questions, but the Science & Engineering SLs' work also includes projects and teaching specific to engineering.

Supervisory Librarians' Perspectives:

Every year, as we plan to interview and hire from the new cohort of library school students, we remind ourselves that our applicants might lack hands-on library experience, practical reference skills and subject expertise. We understand that there is no substitute for such skills: they require time, effort and hard work. For these reasons, we generally seek the following characteristics and skills when selecting library school students for our science and engineering reference desk positions:

Communication skills: We look for people with strong communication skills, public service orientation and a passionate interest in working with the public. We appreciate if a person has a background working in a large, diffused and complex organization, which a large academic library can sometimes be. We pay a significant amount of attention to nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, tone of voice and body language.

- Good customer service: We seek people who possess integrity, flexibility, an abundance of patience and a readiness to learn. We also look for abilities such as empathy and listening skills. We want our SLs to make an effort to understand our users and their unique contexts. This will stand them in good stead as they grow into the profession.
- Team player: We work as a team representing our library to our users. We look for people who can work creatively in a team setting, people who are approachable, cooperative, and dependable. For much of their reference desk time our SLs are scheduled on the desk with other staff members, both librarians and support staff, and they also work closely with the subject librarians who assign them specific projects.
- Imagination and creativity: The library world is changing rapidly. We need innovative, creative and flexible students to work on our reference desk who will question why we do what we do, challenge the way we currently do our work, and to contribute ideas that help us transform our daily practices.
- No need for a science background: At our science and engineering library we have three (3) science librarians and two (2) support staff serving over 10,500 students, faculty, and staff in the Faculties of Science and Applied Sciences. Although a specific background degree would be helpful, we recognize that statistically speaking very few people with science or engineering degrees pursue a library science degree. Since a subject librarian might be responsible for a very diverse set of subjects, such as mathematics, wood science, and mining, we do not believe that a specific background degree would prove overly useful. For both those reasons, we happily hire Humanities and Social Sciences majors who are interested in embracing the challenge of science and engineering librarianship.

As supervisors, we consciously and conscientiously provide our library school students with structure, support and enough responsibilities and challenges, that they will acquire and develop skills that will stand them in good stead as they pursue their profession. Their work on the reference desk and on projects, and their experiences teaching, will introduce them to the world of academic librarianship, reveal the behind-the-scenes work that librarians and support staff do, and give them opportunities to grow professionally and successfully contribute to their work environment.

Some advice to library school students interested in working while pursuing their degree:

- Cultivate relationships with your supervisor and other librarians: Ask for feedback. Learn to handle feedback in a positive way, try not to be defensive, and ask for specific examples and evidence if necessary.
- Read: When a professional librarian talks about a topic you do not understand, ask about it and be willing to investigate, research and read; it will help you to understand the issues better.
- Keep notes: In meetings, workshops, on the desk, take plenty of notes and keep them. You never know when you will need them, but you may well consult some of these notes as you enter the world of professional librarianship.
- Ask questions: This is the most important part for us, as supervisors of student librarians -- "*when in doubt, ask someone*." You should never feel embarrassed if you do not know something. We all learned by asking our colleagues many, many questions when we worked at our first professional positions. We value asking very highly. By asking, you learn the right answers and also create a relationship with other library professionals that might lead you to sometimes unexpected places. You are entering a profession where

you expect and encourage people to ask you questions, you should be modeling this expectation.

Student Perspectives:

As SLAIS students, we see postings for SL positions with the various branch and unit libraries on the UBC Vancouver campus. Every Spring, librarian representatives from units looking to hire SLs for the coming academic year give a presentation about their units, the kind of work their student librarians will do, and the qualities they look for in a new hire. This helps us understand expectations and encourages us to consider the areas of librarianship in which we would like to work. So why choose Science and Engineering Library? For these library students, the reasons were threefold:

- Inquisitiveness: Though one may not have a background in the physical sciences (indeed none of us do), the prospect of venturing into new intellectual territory is exciting and challenging. Various instructors and professionals claim that a zest for knowledge and a willingness to learn are among the most important skills that a student librarian can possess. We believe this approach will serve a student new to Science and Engineering well.
- Portfolio diversification: Pursuing a position in Science and Engineering is also an excellent way to build and diversify a CV. Many students come to library school from the Humanities and Social Sciences. Competition for liaison librarian positions in these subject areas can be strong. Taking a position with Science and Engineering is a perfect opportunity for student librarians to demonstrate adaptability to potential future employers and open new avenues for job hunting. Indeed, if various job boards are an indicator, some of the most exciting positions for new graduates interested in academic librarianship are in the physical and applied sciences.
- Mentorship: In the interview, our supervisors highlighted training and mentorship opportunities, as well as the following tenets: *"It's okay not to know"* and *"If you don't know, ask."* Such gestures might seem trivial, but do much to allay fears that Humanities and Social Science students may have about their ability to succeed in the realm of Science and Engineering librarianship.

Being placed in a supportive environment with professional librarians has allowed us to put skills learned in the classroom to practical use, begin building a professional network, and develop an appreciation for the fact that there are often many ways to meet an information need.

As student librarians in the Science & Engineering Library we are involved in the three primary activities of academic librarianship--reference, collection development, and instruction. We discuss each of these here in brief:

Reference

For us, as new student librarians, shared shifts on the reference desk with librarians and experienced paraprofessionals are extremely formative learning experiences. Each library system has unique organizational idiosyncrasies, and each discipline a unique set of resources. Working together on the desk is a chance for us to:

- Absorb insider knowledge *in situ*.
- Observe the librarian model effective reference interview skills.
- Receive immediate feedback on our interactions with patrons from librarians and support staff.

In a 2004 forum for Science and Technology librarians on developing core competencies, Anne Zeidman-Karpinski advised those new to the field that, "you will make mistakes when dealing with your supervisor(s)" (Mitchell 2004). From personal experience, this is true. We have found that the key is to follow the old adage and learn from your mistakes, and as Zeidman-Karpinski says, "get over them and move on" (Mitchell 2004).

Through the course of our education we are told that, to be a good reference librarian, one does not need to have a degree--advanced or otherwise--in a given subject area; as professionals we should be able to apply the same techniques and search methodologies to any subject area. Time, experience, and familiarity with subject specific resources will equip us with the tools and knowledge needed to retrieve information efficiently. Overcoming the initial fear of the unknown, however, can still be a challenge.

One of the most important lessons we have learned, and one that our supervisors have pushed from the beginning, is always to ask questions. We are not going to wake up one day and simply know the job, but are instead on a journey in which learning is an ongoing and key component. Instead of being intimidated by Science and Engineering terminology and complex resources, we took this as an opportunity to deepen our knowledge about new subject areas and build confidence in our abilities to assist students with subject specific research needs.

Collection development

The collection management courses we have taken have provided us with a theoretical basis for collection management activities; however as with any skill, practical application is an important milestone on the road to expertise. The Science & Engineering Library involves its SLs in collection development activities; this is important because, as Johnson (2009) says, knowledge of collection development policy and procedures is a "competenc[y] that new librarians should bring to their first job." Assisting with collection management activities has provided us the following advantages:

- Increased familiarity with subject heading and descriptor terms, as well as specific titles, in a new subject area.
- Improved our ability to provide better quality reference services by giving us a deeper understanding of the topic.
- Mentorship opportunities that the busy schedules of our supervisors might not otherwise afford.

In addition to familiarizing us with specific subject areas within Science and Engineering, the collections projects have introduced us to some of the more practical matters librarians face on the job, and have given us first-hand experience with acquisitions mechanisms. We have also learned that in practice, collection development relies heavily on budget, which is in turn determined by an institution's size and a specific political climate. These are aspects of collection development we are not always exposed to in our courses, or at least not at such a granular level.

Instruction

The opportunity to lead bibliographic instruction sessions has allowed us to develop instructional competencies, an increasingly important aspect of academic librarianship (Kemp 2006). Representing the Science & Engineering Library at curriculum-specific, live-search presentations has: increased our knowledge of the student body we work with; facilitated communication when we meet students from our instructional sessions at the reference desk; and, helped familiarize us with Science and Engineering subject areas and subject specific

resources.

Along with the many benefits of instruction came a unique set of challenges for each of us. The databases and terminology used in the presentations were new to us all but, for some, teaching was not. Our supervisor kindly took steps to "level the playing field" and ensure that our first instructional experiences as SLs went as smoothly as possible; other librarians in supervisory roles may consider similar methods:

- Invite student librarians to observe instructional sessions taught by yourself or another professional.
- Provide a lesson plan or, if part of the teaching experience includes creating one, a sample lesson plan.
- Offer to sit in on an instructional session led by the student librarian(s) you oversee, take notes, and provide constructive feedback. (According to our supervisors, this also provides helpful material to draw on when we call on you to act as a reference in future).
- Organize a forum for questions and discussion after presentations take place so that student librarians can learn from their experiences.

This nurturing approach might require more time and energy of librarians initially but, in our case, dispelled any qualms we harboured about venturing into the Engineering classroom. In the end we feel that it has saved our supervisors time, allowing them to 'pass the torch' to us with confidence and fully capitalize on the release time the SL position is intended to create.

Some advice for library students interested in pursing positions in Science and Engineering

We have found that the opportunity to work as student librarians is an invaluable experience and an integral aspect of preparing for a job as an information professional. The experience has built our confidence and solidified our classroom learning as well as strengthened our résumés. While we learn valuable theory at library school, practice and hands on experience is invaluable. We conclude with a few words of advice to library students considering a position in science and engineering:

- Exercise patience with yourself and with others.
- Communicate with your supervisor and be sure to ask questions.
- Do not be intimidated by unfamiliar subject matter; embrace it as a learning opportunity.
- Take the opportunity to learn from the patron; view the reference interaction as a mutually informative experience.
- Seek out a Science and Engineering librarian as a mentor.
- Show initiative in order to get the most out of the experience; you will only get out what you put in.
- Join professional association interest groups and subscribe to Science and Engineering librarianship mailing lists; attend conferences if possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, UBC Library's Science and Engineering division is an example of how student librarians can be effectively incorporated into the workplace in a way that benefits both students and their supervisors. For supervisors, having student librarians assist with reference, collection development, and instructional activities provides release time needed to engage in other duties. Taking the time to train and mentor student librarians constitutes a contribution to the profession, by attracting promising future librarians to Science and Engineering--a field they might not have considered otherwise. For students, participating in such activities

reinforces theory gained in the classroom, and presents a new and challenging arena for learning. This article, a collaborative effort by three library students and their supervisors, in itself demonstrates how mentorship can lead to unanticipated and extremely fortuitous experiences.

[1] At UBC Library, just before the beginning of Term 1, Librarians and support staff provide a full-time, week long training programme that all upcoming student librarians must participate in. Sessions cover general knowledge of the circulation module, health and safety training, multidisciplinary databases that can be used for all subjects. Student librarians also attend sessions where they learn about subject resources specific to the Library they will work in.

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