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Learning (and Teaching) On The Job: Developing and Extending the Skills Needed to Deliver Information Literacy Workshops

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Background: This article aims to bolster confidence in early career librarians or other information professionals who may be new to delivering presentations to student groups. By sharing their experiences, three librarians discuss the skills needed and show that these skills can be developed.

Tom Guest, who joined the library as an early career professional in 2015; Katherine Turner, a mid-career professional who has been with the organisation ten years and only took on teaching responsibilities four years ago; Karen Carney, who joined Leeds Beckett's Academic Support Team in 2012 soon after ending a previous career in the Civil Service.

Tom

Prior to joining the Academic Support Team (AST) in January 2015, I had never delivered any workshops to students. In my role as an Information Services Librarian (ISL), I am required to deliver the following Skills for Learning workshops: 'Library induction', 'Referencing for beginners' and 'Finding information for your assignments'.

In order to develop my understanding of delivering workshops, I shadowed several colleagues to acquire an understanding of the different approaches to and styles of teaching. These shadowing experiences helped me to develop my own style of delivery. I also attended an internal Leeds Beckett People Development course on presentation skills which helped me prepare for delivering workshops.

I produced my own slides for each workshop, adapting content from existing templates where possible. Whilst tailoring the content of the workshops and deciding on exactly what I was going to say, I prioritised the information that I thought would be of most use to students, as providing information relevant to their information needs helps to engage the audience

and maintain their interest. As Montgomery (2015, p. 21) notes, "...information will not be processed and retained if the learner can't see the use or applicability to their needs." I have found that there is an element of trial and error involved in deciding on what information is included and how it is conveyed. At times, what I thought was the best information to include could, in light of hindsight and feedback, have been altered or replaced.

I found initially that the 'Library induction' was the workshop I was most comfortable delivering, as this included a lot of general and introductory information I had picked up as a new member of staff – the library was new to me as well as to the students. Even amongst first year students, the information needs of individuals can vary greatly. Some will want to know the opening hours or how many items they can borrow, whilst others will have a deeper interest in online resources, for example. Some may want some initial information about specific services, such as disability support or Offsite. So whilst the information offered in this workshop is varied, the majority of it is quite general, and is therefore relatively easy to communicate.

The 'Finding information for your assignments' workshop expands on parts of the induction. Whilst in an induction I will introduce and briefly explain the systems students can use to access resources, the aim of this workshop is to enable them to better understand and use these systems, including both the Library catalogue and the resource discovery tool, 'Discover'. Again, I found the information needs of students to be diverse, and as such it's important to cover advice on how to access and evaluate a range of different resources.

'Referencing for beginners', covering Harvard referencing, is the workshop I have most enjoyed delivering. Owing to the importance of the skill of referencing and its relative usefulness to students, those attending seem generally to be very engaged. Whereas the other two workshops contain some information that is comparatively subjective, the referencing workshop contains objective information about a skill that students need to learn in order to succeed academically. I find it a rewarding workshop to deliver, as I can see students acquiring new information and learning something very specific.

Ultimately, my experience of delivering these workshops has been a positive one and I've found that my confidence has continued to develop as I've gained more experience.

Katherine

As an Information Service Librarian (ISL), my job role is quite varied and involves supporting the team of Academic Librarians (ALs) at both campus libraries in addition to supporting students with face to face, telephone and email library enquiries. Working with the two other ISLs in my team, my normal duties include assisting the ALs to develop and maintain their subject pages, producing statistics on team teaching activities and contributing to development of the library collections. Another key responsibility is teaching on the generic information literacy skills programme, which includes workshops on a range of topics, for example 'Referencing for beginners'. Before I moved to the Library Academic Support Team, I had little experience with teaching and, whilst I had provided one-to-one information literacy support for learners when working on frontline services, this work involves a different skillset,

including the ability to use classroom technology and presentation skills, classroom management techniques and understanding of learning processes. The new teaching responsibilities I took on when moving to this team were both an interesting challenge and useful opportunity for professional development.

Goodsett (2014) comments that though information literacy instruction is more than just presenting material, a majority of library professionals who take on this responsibility will have had minimal prior training or experience in teaching. This reflects my experience as much of my teaching skills and knowledge have been learnt 'on the job' and developed through the process of delivering the workshops themselves. Undertaking peer-observation, to learn from other library colleagues with teaching responsibilities, as well as increasing the range of workshops I deliver to gain experience of working with different audiences, has further extended my skills. Practical experience is, of course, a key aspect of learning (Kolb, 2014) but, as I gained more experience in teaching, I developed an increasing interest in how I could improve my teaching effectiveness, and felt I wanted to learn more about pedagogical theory and approaches. Information literacy is an important life-skill as well as a key aspect of learner success (Sconul Working Group on Information Literacy, 2011) and I felt it important to work to improve my teaching knowledge, so I needed to look for opportunities to do this.

A simple initial stage was to get back into the routine of regular professional reading, which had been invaluable when going through the process of achieving Chartership. At the same time, I also restarted my personal reflective log capturing my thoughts on the literature and how I might apply ideas to my own practice. A colleague recommended the five-week Massive Online Learning Course (MOOC) on first steps into learning and teaching offered by Oxford Brookes (2017). This collaborative course gave me space to explore more pedagogical theory and use it to further reflect on my own practice and share knowledge with an asynchronous online community. Using a critically reflective approach to teaching practice is important for development (Brookfield, 1995) and this MOOC was a useful stepping stone, as later in the year, I gained a place

on the teaching for librarians course, organized by the CILIP Information Literacy Group and held at the Northern College. This intensive residential course was a truly worthwhile experience, which led to a level 3 teaching award and I was able to benefit from the knowledge and shared perspective of other library professionals on this collaborative course.

The course also underlined the importance of incorporating critical reflection into teaching practice. Worthwhile reflection can be uncomfortable at times, but I recognise the positive impact it has had. I am able to capture thoughts on factors that contributed to whether sessions have run successfully or not, and consider potential changes I could make to improve the learning experience. It has also encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and do things which have challenged me. As I have noted throughout, learning from others about their teaching approaches has been a vital part of my learning journey and I feel it is important that I share this learning in my own small way. I am fortunate to work in a highly collaborative profession and sector, and fellow information literacy practitioners regularly share knowledge and approaches at Teach-meet events. I thoroughly recommend colleagues attend events like this if possible; it's a good opportunity to contribute to discussions on teaching and, if you feel brave enough, to share your approaches to practice as a speaker. I made this step at a Teach-meet I attended last year and found the safe space and supportive audience immensely beneficial.

Karen

I've often mused, what constitutes being a Librarian? My answer has always been contained within a myriad of things. When I've asked a student or a friend 'what do you think a librarian does?' - apart from the usual jokes - I inevitably get a variety of more sensible answers. However, no-one has ever said that librarians 'teach'. Indeed, I may have 'presented' in the past but 'teaching'? I don't count myself as a 'teacher' and yet some librarians do so without having formal teaching qualifications.

Some 'quick and dirty' searches revealed many others before me had asked themselves the same question. The opening sentence in *The Librarian as a Teacher* (Wilkinson, 1907, p. 121) "The

librarian should be estimated on the basis of ability to teach" and the argument for teachers becoming librarians and vice versa by LaBrant in *Library teacher or classroom teacher* in 1940. Even still four decades later when Wilson, in *Librarians as teachers*, was acknowledging "...the enduring problems of defining what a librarian is " (1979, p146) I know I am not alone with my dilemma. Search a few blogs online now and you will find others continuing the same discussion.

When newly qualified, I felt very comfortable supporting students at the Library's Research & Information desk. All my work then, involved helping students on a one-to-one basis. I had trained well through my studies and together with my past experience in the Civil Service, the interaction and support I offered to our customers placed me in an excellent position to offer the same level of customer service Leeds Beckett Library has won awards for. However, my CILIP-accredited course in 2008/09 included little relating to the practicalities of teaching, as is the case with many courses. In 2010, for example, just three UK library courses offered optional teaching-related modules (Simmons, 2010, cited in Wheeler and McKinney, 2015, p. 114).

As Shank and Bell (2011, p.105) had already profoundly declared, "Change pushes academic librarianship onward", I was relishing the opportunity to be able to join the Library's Academic Support Team in 2012. This was to bring new challenges, where I learned quickly and gained new skills. Working with other ISLs supporting the ALs in our team meant a variety of opportunities came my way.

Of the most value, I believe, is being able to work alongside supportive colleagues at different stages of their careers. I have seen first-hand: their enthusiasm for their work - always apparent; their commitment to deliver - more than expected, inherently displayed. Backed by their substantial knowledge of the university, the curriculum and governance - all enabled me to discover what it actually means to be a professional librarian. One of my own commitments to them was that I work as part of a team with mutual values and standards.

As Academic Librarians, everything my colleagues do embodies their professionalism. Arguably, their main reason for being is the time

and effort they devote to teaching. As a team and to the outsider, it is our teaching statistics which are at the heart of our achievements supported by positive feedback from our students and academia.

As an ISL in this team I felt I had to put myself on an equal footing to match their skills. I am part of a team and I have to maintain the same standard as my immediate colleagues. With their support and without any formal teacher training, I have now delivered several workshops, without complaint or hindrance.

The necessity of learning these skills in the workplace has become a common thread within our sector. Bewick and Corral (2010, p. 107) found the majority of their respondents learned skills on the job or via “peer interaction”

In 2015 myself and the other ISLs in our team were asked to deliver 50% of the AST’s contribution to the University’s Skills for Learning sessions. As explained previously, these are library focused workshops aimed at teaching our undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The prospect of presenting these workshops filled me with even more enthusiasm than when I had qualified in my new career. Except one thing, I’d never thought of myself as a ‘teacher’. As a newly qualified librarian one should take account of colleagues in our profession; few librarians, it seems, have formal teaching-related qualifications, according to a small study by Bewick and Corral (2010, p102).

My introduction to this ‘teaching’ was quite basic, I was given access to the already prepared PowerPoint slides and that was almost it. I decided what was needed of me, by way of my own motivation, developed from my inherent understanding of teamwork and colleagues’ professionalism - I needed to be well prepared for each separate subject I was expected to deliver.

Despite having full knowledge of the Library and its functionality, a sound understanding of referencing and good searching for information skills I decided to approach my preparation almost scientifically. I have now loosely based them around the scientific process of the who, what, why, and where, or background research, hypothesis, test and analyse methodology. I converted this to my own method: Subject, Prepare, Deliver, Result, Analyse (Fig. 1) - I’ve

created my own aide memoire which you might like to use.

Preparation is key; before I was let loose, I sat in with the workshops and classes my AL colleagues delivered. This gave me the knowledge of how formal/informal the classes happened to be. I gained an insight into how students behave. I began to understand that each colleague has their own unique style of delivery. I seemed to instinctively realise that I was actually going to be able to deliver my own session in my own way. I don't offer a life changing experience, it's just me in front of a room of people.

By learning and understanding what it is I’m presenting, not just repeating verbatim, I gained more confidence in the classroom. Receiving feedback from students and acting on their questions and points raised, I adapted my sessions accordingly. I changed the simple phrases used. I updated the actual referencing examples, making them more topical.

I have learned a little of how students learn, each one in a different way. There are no two alike. I think, if I were a trained teacher I would have an understanding of what is meant by pedagogy and I’d be able to develop myself and our students further.

Having done these workshops for four terms now, I still don’t consider myself a teacher. What I am doing is delivering information, but with confidence. I think this is the important aspect of my performance, which in turn must help our students learn.

Many of my colleagues have achieved the Higher Education Academy (HEA) accreditation and this is something I aim to undertake. In the meantime, I count myself as a presenter of facts and information whilst in the classroom. Our ‘teaching’ for the ISLs on our team is not our main task, we have a varied range of responsibilities and as the University develops our roles will continue to change.

This year in my Personal Development Review I will include an opportunity to enhance my IT skills and develop professionally through CILIP Chartership; all on the horizon. And further on, do I see a HEA accreditation coming towards me?

Conclusion

Perhaps we can compare our passion to that of musician Dave Grohl of Foo Fighters (n.d. quoted in Hemeon, 2017) “I never took lessons to play the drums. I never took lessons to play the guitar. I just sort of figured it out. I think that if you’re passionate about something and you’re driven and you’re focused, you can do anything you want to do in life.”

We agree with this but acknowledge the underlying need to practise. We have used our passion to learn our craft as it is a continuous professional development path. By collaborating with peers and with our students we have been supported in overcoming any initial fears of standing alone at the front of the class and we can now do this with assurance. Our passion for our profession drives us forward and our experiences give us the confidence to do so.

Recognising our passion for librarianship and understanding more about what the profession means to us, we believe, we have accomplished not just personal goals in delivering presentations, but ways of gaining skills and methods that we can pass on to others in the profession. We did accomplish what we set out to do and paraphrasing Shank and Bell (2011, p105) the three of us have changed and we continue to do so, we are indeed, pushing ourselves forward as librarians.

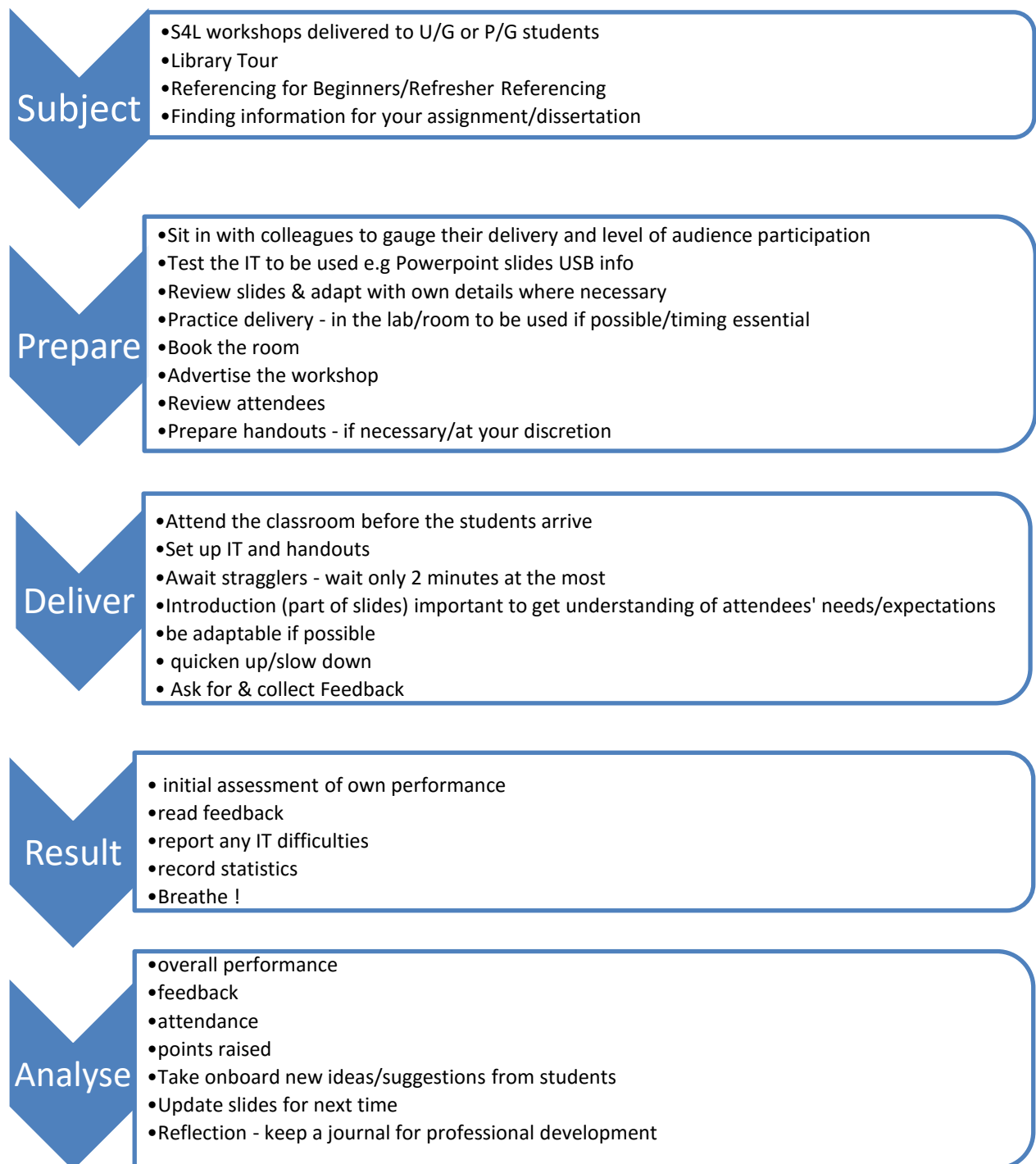


Fig. 1: 5 steps to consider to help build self-confidence for presenting

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