Instructional leadership

New responsibilities for a new reality

by Clara S. Fowler and Scott Walter

If you work in an academic library, chances are very good that there is someone in your organization with a title like library instruction coordinator or head of library instruction.[1] While much has been written about how the rise of the Internet has affected the day-to-day work of librarians in areas such as reference, instruction, and collection development, less has been said about how other organizational imperatives help redefine the role of information professionals in the academic library of the 21st century.[2]

As librarians are called upon to examine the new realities that shape their professional work, we ask you to consider what you should expect of your instruction coordinator. This is not a trick question, but it is a complicated one. For us, the answer is "instructional leadership."

What is instructional leadership?

Instructional leadership is a concept drawn from the literature of educational administration to describe the role that a school principal plays in helping to create a culture of instruction and assessment in a school, placing student learning at the center of the instructional process, and fostering the professional growth of teachers as classroom instructors.[3] In *School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence,* James Weber identified the main functions of the instructional leader as: defining the school's mission, managing curriculum and instruction, promoting a positive learning environment, observing and improving instruction, and assessing the instructional program.[4] Early studies of instructional leadership described a hierarchical situation in which decision-making about curriculum and instruction was purely top-down, but more recent studies focus on the instructional leader as a facilitator, i.e., a leader who "empowers others to be leaders."[5] Today, instructional leadership is a concept that defines a leadership role not only for the principal, but also for teachers who lead by constantly refining their own teaching, providing advice and expertise to colleagues through mentoring and continuing education, and participating in peer review both of individual teachers and of the instructional program.[6]

Why instructional leadership?

The rise of information literacy instruction as a strategic direction for many libraries increasingly requires the instruction coordinator to act as a leader both within the library and across campus. Instructional leadership is a model that has helped us to understand many of the issues we face every day in our work as coordinators, and to appreciate the new expectations that our administrators have of us.

Even though both authors came to our present positions after years of experience as teachers and librarians, we quickly discovered that we were unaware of the range of challenges that coordinators must face in order to balance the issues surrounding the design, development, and promotion of an instruction program. Some of these issues are discussed below. They are drawn both from our experiences over the past year, and from responses received from colleagues following an informal query on the ILI-L electronic discussion list.

About the authors

Clara Fowler is coordinator of instruction at the University of Houston, e-mail: fowler@wsu.edu, and Scott Walter is interim assistant director for public services and outreach at Washington State University, e-mail: swalter@wsu.edu

What does an instructional leader look like?

The question of what makes an effective leader is ancient. Robert J. House, for example, notes that discussions of leadership "can be found in the Greek and Latin classics, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the writings of the ancient Chinese philosophers, and in the early Icelandic sagas."[7] Unfortunately, the leadership literature is rarely referenced in discussions of the work of the instruction coordinator.

Most studies of instruction librarianship focus on how to develop one's skills as a teacher. Of the literature that looks beyond the classroom to suggest issues that might arise when managing an instruction program, there is little that transcends the discussion of problems associated with issues such as scheduling classrooms, managing budgets, and arranging for enough volunteers from among one's colleagues to ensure that all the classes get taught.[8] There is a significant difference, however, between management issues such as these and leadership issues. The distinction is an important one for the instruction coordinator.[9]

One of the few authors to go beyond this idea of the instruction coordinator as teacher or manager is Sharon Mader, who identified five key leadership traits for a coordinator: vision, willingness to take risks, ability to inspire colleagues, ability to communicate effectively, ability to build teams, and a commitment to innovative approaches to instruction.[10]

These characteristics are very similar to those identified in leadership literature. Warren Bennis, for example, identified a leader as someone who innovates, inspires trust, focuses on people, has a long-range perspective, and challenges the status quo.[11] Likewise, the characteristics echo more general comments found in library literature about the need for new models for leadership in libraries.[12] Finally, they are consonant with the role defined for the instructional leader in the education literature, especially in the emphasis on the need for vision and planning, and in the idea of the instructional leader as a facilitative leader who helps colleagues improve their own teaching while inspiring them to take on leadership roles of their own.

Why do we need instructional leaders now?

Both academic librarianship and higher education have changed significantly in recent years. One result of these changes has been that the instruction coordinator is now committed to systematic planning for an instructional program that must be effectively articulated across the academic program and coordinated with the efforts of complementary instructional initiatives originating from outside the library. The issues facing the coordinator today are very different from those described in much of the work we read while preparing for our careers. Several factors in the contemporary professional environment have combined to suggest the need for a new way of conceiving the role played by the librarian assigned to coordinate—to lead—the instruction program in an academic library. Among these are:

• the commitment to information literacy as a strategic direction for academic libraries;

• the need for more librarians to be involved in the design and delivery of instructional services, either alone, or in collaboration with members of the classroom faculty;

• the rise of innovative, interdisciplinary initiatives on many college campuses that provide opportunities for rethinking the ways in which library instruction can support (and enhance) the academic curriculum;

• the call to create student-centered learning opportunities that foster critical thinking and fluency in information technology; and,

• the need to demonstrate measurable achievement in these areas through a systematic program of assessment.

Make no mistake, there will always be a need for professional education that prepares novice instruction librarians to identify instructional objectives, design lesson plans, and create appropriate classroom activities and assignments. In fact, recent developments in instructional technology assure us that ongoing education of this type will be necessary even for experienced teachers now called upon to design electronic classrooms, develop Web-based instructional services, and create instructional materials meant for use within courseware such as WebCT.

What these factors suggest, however, is that instruction programs are becoming increasingly complex, and ever more closely tied to initiatives of import across the campus because of broader trends both in the profession and in higher education. Instruction programs need well-trained and effective leaders if they are to meet both the profession's commitment to preparing library users who are information literate and the growing imperative to collaborate creatively across campus with newly defined programs of instruction and assessment.

How does an instructional leader act?

There are a number of issues facing instruction coordinators today that require them to act as instructional leaders. An example of these issues can be found in the responsibility that the coordinator has today for effectively articulating a vision and a systematic plan for instruction both to colleagues within the library and to the rest of the institution. Since many of us are already familiar with the difficulties one can have communicating the importance of library instruction to constituencies, such as classroom faculty, we will focus here on the question of how to facilitate communication among librarians involved in the instruction program. The way one meets this challenge reflects the degree to which one is acting as an instructional leader.

Several factors can hinder the coordinator's ability to communicate a vision and a plan for the instruction program to colleagues. For example:

• many librarians participate in instruction as only one element of their professional duties;

• instruction programs are often divided between the instructional services provided to lower-division students and those provided to upper-division and graduate students, with different librarians taking responsibility for each (e.g., instruction librarians vs. subject specialists); and,

• few librarians have the opportunity to interact with faculty and administrators across campus on a regular basis, and may therefore not be as aware of relevant instructional initiatives on campus.

Acting as an instructional leader, the coordinator must think creatively about how to foster communication among colleagues. Electronic discussion lists, "brown bag" meetings, and library forums are among the means that coordinators have used to promote discussion of the instruction program. Others include the formation of library-wide task forces to articulate the organization's goals in terms of instruction and to facilitate greater collaboration between those responsible for lower-division and upper-division instruction. The coordinator must not only facilitate communication among colleagues regarding the library instruction program, but must also continuously scan the campus environment by meeting with faculty and administrators from partner programs in order to identify complementary instructional initiatives originating outside the library and identify the best way to communicate this information to colleagues within the library.

To deal with issues such as those described above, one must be innovative and focused on meeting the needs of professional colleagues, classroom faculty, and students. In the increasingly complex instructional landscape on today's college or university campus, these are the responsibilities facing instruction coordinators. To take advantage of the opportunities each affords, coordinators must begin to think of themselves as instructional leaders.

Conclusion

We did not choose instructional leadership as a new model for understanding our role in the organization simply to make ourselves feel good about our work. Rather, we came to it as we attempted to understand why we faced such a complicated set of issues as we worked to build our respective instruction programs, and why we constantly had to think "outside the box" (or, in our cases, the classroom) in order to identify ways of dealing with them.

We introduced these ideas to an audience of instruction librarians at the LOEX-of-the-West 2002 conference in Eugene, Oregon, as part of a presentation entitled (with apologies to John Holt), "What Do I Do on Monday?: Issues and Opportunities for the Instruction Coordinator."[13] We will consider them further in a longer research article still in progress. Initial feedback from the presentation suggests that our discussion of the idea of the instruction coordinator as instructional leader is not only positively received by our peers, but appreciated as a model that helps explain how forces both in the profession and in higher education are affecting the roles they play in the library and on campus.

New responsibilities are accruing to the instruction coordinator not simply because of inertia, or because of a desire on the part of an individual coordinator to assume greater responsibility (although both factors are certainly in play), but because the coordinator is being asked, overtly or implicitly, to act in a new way within the organization. It is only by taking on these responsibilities in full understanding of the issues and opportunities that may arise that the coordinator can help move the library toward its strategic goals in the area of information literacy instruction and assessment. So, to the instruction coordinators, we say: learn to lead. And, to library administrators, we say: let them.

Notes

1. A recent survey of academic libraries in the United States reported that over 90 percent of respondents identified a librarian as coordinator of library instruction. See Kristin Johnson and Kathleen Carlisle Fountain, "Laying a Foundation for Comparing Departmental Structures between Reference and Instructional Services: Analysis of a Nationwide Survey," *College & Research Libraries* 63 (2002), 281.

2. For an example of this thread in the literature, see Lewis-Guodo Liu (ed.), *The Role and Impact of the Internet on Library and Information Services* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001).

3. National Association of Elementary School Principals, *Leading Learning Communities: NAESP Standards for What Principals Should Know and be Able to Do* (Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001).

4. James Weber, "Leading the Instructional Program," in *School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence*, 3rd ed., eds. Stuart C. Smith and Philip K. Piele (Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1997), 253–78.

5. Larry Lashway, *Can Instructional Leaders be Facilitative Leaders?* (Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 1995) [online]. Retrieved June 11, 2003, from http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest098.html; Weber, "Leading the Instructional Program," 277.

6. Nathalie Gehrke, *Developing Teachers' Leadership Skills* (Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teacher Education, 1991) [online]. Retrieved June 11, 2003, from http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed330691.html; Deborah Perkins-Gough, "Beyond Instructional Leadership," *Educational Leadership* 59 (2002): 96 [online]. Retrieved June 11, 2003, from http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0205/perkinsgough_2.html.

7. Robert J. House, "Leadership," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedic Dictionary of Organizational Behavior*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 284.

8. For representative examples, see ACRL Bibliographic Instruction Section, *Learning to Teach: Workshops on Instruction* (Chicago: ACRL, 1993); and Esther Grassian, "Setting Up and Managing a BI Program," in *Sourcebook for Bibliographic Instruction* (Chicago: ACRL, 1993), 59–75.

9. See, for example, Abraham Zaleznik, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?," *Harvard Business Review* 55 (1977): 67–78; and, Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1989).

10. Sharon Mader, "Instruction Librarians: Leadership in the New Organization," *RQ* 36 (1996): 192–97.

11. Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader*.

12. See, for example, Robert T. Sweeney, "Leadership in the Post-Hierarchical Library," *Library Trends* 43 (1994): 62-94; and Terrence F. Mech and Gerard B. McCabe, eds., *Leadership and Academic Libraries* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998).

13. J. Holt, *What do I do Monday?* (New York: Dutton, 1970). ■

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and able to implement, assess, and adapt our program quickly. In order to facilitate this adaptability, we let the newly hired software support students know that they were participating in a trial service and that their assigned shifts and tasks might vary throughout the pilot project.

Conclusions

During the course of our pilot software support project, we found that the technical expertise and competence exhibited by our student assistants complements our existing reference service. These students can be deployed by librarians to handle most technical questions received at the desk, thus freeing librarians to focus on research related questions. In addition, software support students are able to quickly resolve many technical problems that previously would have been referred to the already busy library systems department. Their assistance is particularly valuable during evening and weekend hours, when the library systems department is not staffed and the reference staff is extremely busy. Overall, the software support program has allowed us to provide quality technical support without overwhelming the professional staff. ■

Correction

Ilene F. Rockman is affiliated with the California State University Office of the Chancellor and not the University of California-Berkeley as was listed in the May issue of *C&RL News*. The editors regret the error.