

Brett Bodemer

# The wisdom of embedding student assistants in library learning workflows

## Focus on listening and learning

I realize that the above title is a bit recalcitrant, rather like a difficult poem at first reading. However, by the end of this essay I intend that its strange vocabulary, when revisited, will resonate clearly. Even more, I hope it will serve as a call to academic libraries to establish authentic student assistant collaborations that not only help achieve library goals but optimize library services via what is learned from the student assistants about our ever-changing patrons, their peers. Such collaborative programs, once established, can perpetually keep librarians attuned to the rolling edge of changing student needs, dispositions, and behaviors.

The proposal advocated here is based on six years of progressive experience with undergraduate peer reference and instruction providers at California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo. I have written elsewhere of the impact these LibRATs (Library Research Assistance Technicians) have had on the quality and reach of reference and instruction at the Robert E. Kennedy Library.<sup>1</sup> Nothing in the intervening years has raised any reservations. In fact, with the addition of a new librarian position for coordinating the design and delivery of the instructional component, the LibRAT program has not only sustained its reach, but has gained in strength and nuance.

What I am writing about here is the flip side of the coin: not how students help other students learn, but how students help librarians learn. When student assistants and librarians engage in extended collaborations on library initiatives with intrinsic academic heft (such as

research and information skills), manifold and unexpected vistas into student life, dispositions and practices are constantly opened up to the view of librarians. By embedding student assistants as partners in such activities, libraries can deliberately nurture ongoing organizational learning as an organic and inherent feature of the collaborative work itself.

What traits must such a collaboration have? First, student assistants must be taken seriously, both as adults and as students. Second, a shared sense of mission must be established and maintained. This is not difficult, as students engaged in reference and instruction are actually grappling with something germane to their interests and success as students, which they instinctively translate to sharing with their fellow students. Third, the collaboration must explicitly encourage the students to engage in authentic self-expression. Again, this is not particularly difficult so long as the librarians establish a tone of honest communication and truly value the insights and opinions of the student assistants.

All the above criteria can be met (from hiring, through training, and in continuing operations) if the librarians abide by the recognition that in such collaborations the relational precedes the merely informational. In treating students as individuals with unique

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Brett Bodemer is College of Liberal Arts librarian, coordinator of general reference at California Polytechnic State University's Robert E. Kennedy Library, email: [bbodemer@calpoly.edu](mailto:bbodemer@calpoly.edu)

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voices, backgrounds, and knowledge while engaging with the content/activities of the program, one will find the students to be quite forthcoming about their ignorance, presumed knowledge, practices, and habits. One can ask them, and they will answer honestly. But one can also watch them: how they search, where they search, how (gasp!) one shares an entire pirated textbook stored on a flash drive. One can listen: how they know solutions to student services about which we are clueless, how they have their own techniques for getting at the question “behind” the question. And, in the best moments, one can simply chat. It is amazing what can be learned, not by design, but inadvertently through the course of undirected conversation.

Strategically conceived and implemented, such programmatic collaborations can continually offer new insights into our ever-changing patrons. Incoming classes will never be the same, and the embedding of student assistants in information literacy and reference programs is a structured way to keep pace. For example, one of our current LibRATs will graduate in spring. He has been with us since he was a first-year. We are also now training three first-years. These have come to our campus with different experiences, expectations, and practices than he did. So will all future first-years. Through close sharing, listening, and watching, we can learn from all these individuals as they mature and roll through their years at Cal Poly. They will also let us know what resonates with them, which we can then together apply to our services, outreach, and instruction.

Such close collaborations, then, engaging student assistants and librarians, truly integrate important professional learning for the librarians into the daily performance of existing duties. If deliberately nurtured, shared, and applied, the stream of observations, perceptions, and knowledge can become a recognized library learning workflow, not one extraneous to everyday endeavors, but one embedded in the activities themselves.

Which brings us to the final resistant triplet of this essay’s title: library learning workflows.

One might typically envision two learning workflows in libraries: nonlocal activities such as webinars, conferences, and reading of the literature. Such nonlocal activities involve withdrawal from the specific institutional environment—whether into an office for a webinar or reading, or traveling away to a conference.

The upside of this “away-ness” is that it is a great way to keep abreast of innovation and the best practices of others, and to find congenial colleagues for collaboration. The downside is the opportunity cost of turning one’s attention from the local patrons and environment.

The other learning workflow can be seen as highly local: intensive surveys and studies of an institution’s various patron groups, analyses of collection usage data, and web analytics all might serve as examples. The upsides are obvious, but a less obvious downside is that this, too, is a form of “away-ness.” Long hours spent designing and analyzing surveys or in crunching eye-killing spreadsheets is time spent with artifacts of our patrons, and not the patrons themselves.

With rapid change the new perennial constant, we need all the help we can get in learning what we should be doing for our student patrons and how we can be most effective. We also do not need additional activities that take our eyes off the ball. Embedding student assistants in close collaborations that continually contribute to library learning is a progressive, sustainable, and eminently reasonable way to go.

## Note

1 Brett B. Bodemer, “They CAN and They SHOULD: Undergraduates Providing Peer Reference and Instruction,” *C&RL* 75, no. 2 (2014): 162-178, <http://crl.acrl.org/content/75/2/162.full.pdf+html>; Brett B. Bodemer, “They Not Only CAN But They SHOULD: Why Undergraduates Should Provide Basic IL Instruction,” *ACRL* 2013: 575-582, [www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/Bodemer\\_BasicILInstruction.pdf](http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/2013/papers/Bodemer_BasicILInstruction.pdf). *z*