

Freya Gibbon

Casting a Broader Net

How Librarians Benefit from Observing Classroom Faculty and Other Guest Instructors

“It’s like trying to pick up a wet bar of soap that’s moving on its own,” the fisheries manager is saying. He’s cradling a brown trout against his rubber apron. He pinches two fingers on her belly just below the pelvic fins and strokes downward, spraying orange eggs into a beat-up steel bowl. “If you squeeze and get poop, stop,” he instructs. In a matter of about 20 minutes, he’s taught a group of 15 students how to sex fish, how to stun and hold fish, and how to fertilize eggs. Once they’ve finished with this tank, he’ll teach them to estimate the number of eggs retrieved by volume.

What’s a librarian doing in a fishery, you ask? While I’m fascinated by this demonstration, my main purpose is pedagogical. I’m here to observe how another pop-in instructor engages a group of students, particularly the same group I’ve just been working with. Much has been written about the value of peer observations of teaching, with benefits both for the observer and the observed.¹ There is also a healthy body of literature about peer review and observation of teaching among librarians.² Yet, very little has been written about the benefit of librarians observing classroom faculty or other pop-in teachers. A near exception is the article “Librarian-Faculty Mentorship: The Missing Link to Departmental Culture” published in the February 2025 issue of *C&RL News*, detailing a program at the University of Victoria where new subject liaisons are paired with faculty mentors to gain insight into departmental culture.³ But, in addition to teaching observations of other librarians, I’ve found external teaching observations to be very valuable. They’ve helped to develop my own teaching, to situate my instruction within the context of a partnering class, and to build campus relationships.

My observation practice began by simply asking faculty I’d been working with on pop-in instruction if I could observe a class. I found that most were open to this exchange and, in fact, welcomed it. I observed a faculty partner teach students how to paraphrase for a literature review. The next time I worked with his class, I could refer to this lesson, making explicit connections between their search and source synthesis lessons. Later, I sat in on student research presentations in an upper-level genetics class and learned that several students needed additional support locating quality sources. I used this to calibrate our next pop-in session and to advertise reference services. Last fall, I observed an early American literature class during a weeks-long role-playing game on the trial of Anne Hutchinson. The faculty sat at the back, only taking a few moments to offer reminders and due dates. Then, a student stood up to lead, calling on her peers for speeches and discussion. I can’t bring this role-playing experience back to the library classroom, but I can certainly use it as inspiration to build in game-based and student-led components for the same student population.

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Librarians hold sometimes unsettled positions in academia, falling somewhere between administrators and faculty.⁴ I consider developing an observation practice as one avenue for broadening who we consider to be our peers in the community beyond the library. There are parallels between what we do and what the Career Center, Writing Center, or Counseling Center might do during a one-off session, and it can be valuable to see how they develop meaningful instruction under similar constraints. But I'd also like to move beyond the one-shot when possible, and engaging with classroom faculty around their teaching can help to prepare the ground for new avenues for library instruction. This year, I'll be working with the English professor whose role-playing game I observed to develop an in-depth information literacy and writing class to be offered in the fall. This partnership didn't begin or end with a classroom observation, but when I took the chance to observe her class, I continued a conversation around pedagogy that grew into our current project.

Back in the fishery, the lab instructor is saying, "You're all parents now! Don't screw up your youth!" It's easier with fish, maybe, to engage a group of students, but it's no more important than when teaching them to evaluate sources for their scholarly work. The fisheries manager's schtick is practiced, but he's watching closely and correcting as needed. I, too, am watching closely. I will certainly take some of his techniques back to the information literacy classroom, especially the directness and clarity of his directions for students, and his straightforward corrections when they're on the wrong track. In the meantime, I'll be squeezing fish. *~*

Notes

1. Maureen Bell, "Supported Reflective Practice: A Programme of Peer Observation and Feedback for Academic Teaching Development," *International Journal for Academic Development* 6, no. 1 (2001): 29-39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440110033643>; Steve Drew et al., "Formative Observation of Teaching: Focusing Peer Assistance on Teachers' Developmental Goals," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 42, no. 6 (2017): 914-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1209733>; Graham Hendry and Gary Oliver, "Seeing Is Believing: The Benefits of Peer Observation," *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 9, no. 1 (January 2012), <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.9.1.7>.

2. Loanne Snaveley and Nancy Dewald, "Developing and Implementing Peer Review of Academic Librarians' Teaching: An Overview and Case Report," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 37, no. 4 (July 2011): 343-51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2011.04.009>; Jaena Alabi and William H. Weare, "The Power of Observation: How Librarians Can Benefit from the Peer Review of Teaching—Even Without a Formal Program," August 27, 2013, <https://aurora.auburn.edu/handle/11200/44203>; Yvonne Hultman Özek, Gudrun Edgren, and Katarina Jandér, "Implementing the Critical Friend Method for Peer Feedback among Teaching Librarians in an Academic Setting," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 7, no. 4 (December 2012): 68-81, <https://doi.org/10.18438/B81C8W>.

3. Monique Grenier and Zahra Premji, "Librarian-Faculty Mentorship: The Missing Link to Departmental Culture," *College & Research Libraries News* 86, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.86.2.53>.

4. Quinn Galbraith, Melissa Garrison, and Whitney Hales, "Perceptions of Faculty Status among Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries* 77, no. 5 (September 2016): 582-94, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.77.5.582>.