

Shevon Desai, Marija Freeland, and Eric Frierson

Lesson Study in libraries

Building better lessons, better teachers, and better teams with creativity, collaboration, and revision

The University of Michigan (UM) University Library faces challenges common to many ACRL member libraries in bibliographic instruction: a diverse audience of both undergraduate and graduate students, a large library system with many librarian instructors of varying levels of experience, and an increasingly complicated digital resource environment, which the library must teach patrons to successfully navigate.

In response to these needs, we tested Lesson Study, a Japanese method of instructional improvement. Lesson Study involves a collaborative, iterative method of lesson plan development that we believed would be especially appropriate for library instruction.

Background

Lesson Study encompasses a “large family of instructional improvement strategies, the shared feature of which is observation of live classroom lessons by a group of teachers who collect data on teaching and learning and collaboratively analyze it.”¹

Lesson Study also involves an iterative component—teachers come together as a group to discuss the best teaching strategies; one person volunteers to teach while others observe. After the trial run of the lesson, the group comes together again with feedback and suggestions to modify the plan. Improvements to the plan are made, then another instructor teaches while others observe and offer feedback, and so on.

Lesson Study is well suited to library instruction because of the nature of our “curriculum.” Librarians teach the same topics over and over again. In addition, many

instructors teach the same content. UM is a large campus with many different libraries, and we have librarians with different levels of expertise. Individual librarians may not be aware of instructional resources available to them or may have a completely different approach to teaching the same resource. These factors make the library environment ripe for an instructional curriculum developed using the Lesson Study method.

Instructors have varying levels of experience, and, for some librarians, teaching is just one of many job responsibilities. Lesson Study provides a collaborative environment for both new and experienced instructors to work together to improve lesson plans and instructional practices.

The UM University Library recently launched a new online research tool called Search Tools (an implementation of Ex Libris’ MetaLib software). It functions as a comprehensive gateway to the library’s various electronic resources—databases, journals, online books, etc.—while also enabling federated searching across multiple databases. Because Search Tools replaced a well-used and more straightforward list of resources and because access to electronic resources is an integral part of all library instruction, there was a pressing need for guidance about how to

Shevon Desai is social sciences and humanities librarian, e-mail: shevonad@umich.edu; Marija Freeland is education and kinesiology librarian, e-mail: mfreelan@umich.edu; and Eric Frierson is instructional technology and communication studies librarian, e-mail: efrierso@umich.edu, at the Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan

© 2007 Shevon Desai, Marija Freeland, and Eric Frierson

teach students to use this complex and often confusing resource.

The Instructor College, a group at the University Library whose goal is to strengthen the instructional skills of library staff, wanted to create resources that would help instructors incorporate Search Tools into their classes. The Instructor College Steering Committee struggled with how to do this effectively. The need for a lesson plan for Search Tools presented the perfect opportunity to try the Lesson Study method.

Process

To implement Lesson Study, we included a brief description of it in the library's staff newsletter along with an invitation to all instructors to attend an initial meeting. The group of instructors who met for the first Lesson Study brainstorming session was quite diverse and consisted of librarians from four different libraries. Some had only a year's instruction experience while others had well over 20. The group also had a range of experience with Search Tools. Some were in the working group that planned and implemented Search Tools; others rarely used it.

For this initial session, the group first set the parameters for the lesson plan. It would take 30 minutes of teaching time. It could be used for all levels of audiences. Individual modules could be pulled out and taught separately. The group considered what needed to be included in the class; these ideas were all noted on flip charts. This session was scheduled for an hour but took longer; in planning a Lesson Study for your own library, assume this step will take twice as long as expected.

One of the authors volunteered to take notes at this initial session and develop a lesson plan from the notes. She recruited some of the group members who were more familiar with Search Tools to help. Then the entire group gave feedback on the lesson plan via e-mail.

Library student employees served as the students in the first class. They had varying amounts of experience; some were new to the university and had never used Search

Tools, while others had limited familiarity. Also included was a mix of graduate and undergraduate students from several disciplines. The students sat in the front of the classroom and observing instructors sat in back. This first class established the pattern that was followed in two subsequent classes. The students heard a brief explanation of Lesson Study, the purpose of the class, and a request for their feedback at the end. The students introduced themselves and talked about their familiarity with library resources and Search Tools. The instructors and observers introduced themselves, and the class began. At the end of the class the students gave their input.

Afterwards, instructors discussed the feedback and proposed lesson plan modifications. Handouts were developed during the process. For instance, the initial class included many examples of how to troubleshoot problems that might arise using Search Tools. As the lesson plan grew, these troubleshooting tips were transferred to a handout in order to keep class length to 30 minutes.

After each class, a different instructor took the feedback and developed a new version of the lesson plan. After the brainstorming session, three classes, and several instructor meetings, the final product was a lesson plan for a 30-minute session on teaching Search Tools, along with handouts and a PowerPoint animated visual aid. Instructors can easily pick and choose among modules in the lesson plan that correspond to various Search Tools functions in order to adapt lesson plans to whatever audience they are teaching.

Problems encountered

One major challenge in the process was timing. We began in August; because of vacation schedules, orientation sessions, and other fall-term preparations, all instructors were pressed for time. We needed to develop the lesson plan in time to have it available for the library instruction classes that would be taught that fall. Some instructors who wanted to participate could not do so because of the timeline. Ideally, Lesson Study should be used during a less busy time of year.

The largest logistical challenge turned out to be recruiting students to serve as test subjects. We were fortunate to have help from library supervisors, who were able to free up their student employees. To implement Lesson Study routinely, we need to find a steady supply of students who have the desired level of experience with the subject being taught and who are from a variety of disciplines. Library science students approach a class on library resources very differently from a typical undergraduate student. We had interesting discussions about whether our lesson plan would work as well with new undergraduates as it would with experienced graduate students.

Benefits

For novice librarian instructors, the pressure of creating a lesson plan from scratch and taking full responsibility for its success or failure can be stressful, especially if other librarians are watching and critiquing the instruction. The collaborative nature of Lesson Study relieves both new and experienced individuals of this culpability. Instead, the effectiveness of any lesson is a shared responsibility among group members. For teachers new to or nervous about teaching, this method is an ideal introduction to instruction. The support of the Lesson Study team is available during trial runs of the class. Any criticism of the lesson plan is seen as a team responsibility to address; there's little risk that a new instructor would take criticism personally.

Student feedback is a key feature of the Lesson Study model. The lesson changes in response both to student feedback as well as instructors' observations of students' reactions. As individual instructors, it is difficult to make adjustments to a lesson based on feedback, but with many minds working to interpret and incorporate these responses into lesson planning, a team can make effective revisions.

Our initial plans for teaching Search Tools did not include making a visual aid. However, as we discussed how to best teach this complex set of tools, we found ourselves relying

on drawings. From those interactions, we found that making sense of the varied functions of Search Tools is easier with a visual aid. We created an initial image which, over the course of our meetings, evolved into an animated PowerPoint slide that we (and students) feel is effective at defining Search Tools. Without our various perspectives and understanding of the tool itself, a visual aid may have never developed.

The diversity of backgrounds of the individuals in the Lesson Study group is a valuable asset in itself—each member brings different ways of understanding a topic and different ideas about teaching it. Diversity enables creative brainstorming and a deeper understanding of the topic. Through our conversations and planning, we dispelled many misconceptions we had about the topic (Search Tools). This benefit has implications beyond the Lesson Study group; we are now better equipped to answer questions about Search Tools at the reference desk and in library instructional settings. Because of our experience with Lesson Study, we can talk about Search Tools with confidence in our own understanding of the tool, and we can advise our Search Tools development team in the design of new features.

Finally, the Lesson Study method helps new and experienced teachers reflect on teaching style. In trial runs of the class, a different group member led the instruction each time. Practical tips on teaching emerged, and, individually, we picked up new skills and ideas.

Implications for the future

We created tangible products from our collaboration: a lesson plan tried and tested multiple times, a visual aid that helps students develop a mental model of Search Tools, and a new Search Tools handout. What use would these be if we couldn't share them with other librarians? Our initial post-Lesson Study plans include developing ways to share our work with other instruction librarians across campus. These include making the new Search Tools materials available through

both the Instructor College Web site² and in the “instructors only” section of a searchable database of library instructional handouts.³ This “instructors only” interface provides access to lesson plans we develop, handouts, and visual aids. We would also like to add a comments feature, so instructors who teach lesson plans found in the database can reflect on them.

Disseminating information about Lesson Study is also important. One of our next goals is to involve more librarians outside of our initial group. To this end, we have scheduled a panel discussion open to all library instructors. Members of the original group will reflect on their experiences and share the benefits of constructing lesson plans in this way. We also plan to solicit future topics for Lesson Study implementation.

In summary, Lesson Study fostered increased collaboration. We’ve taken the task of creating class plans and made it a group effort. We are building better teams, better

lessons, and a better understanding of library instruction by working together. The process is straightforward, and with buy-in from librarians on your own campus, implementing Lesson Study would be easy and effective.

To keep track of what we’re doing with Lesson Study, check out our Web site at www.lib.umich.edu/icollege/lessonstudy/.

Notes

1. Catherine Lewis, Rebecca Perry, and Aki Murata, “How Should Research Contribute to Instructional Improvement? The Case of Lesson Study,” *Educational Researcher* 35 (2006): 3.

2. See Instructor College lesson plans at www.lib.umich.edu/icollege/resources/lessonplans.html

3. See the Library Guides and Tutorials Database at www.lib.umich.edu/guides/. You won’t find our lesson plans here, as they are in an “instructors only” section of this database. //

Expand Your Library

Rittenhouse Book Distributors presents

Rittenhouse is offering their annual Rites of Spring Promotion **NOW.**

Call Rittenhouse 1-800-345-6425 or visit our website, www.rittenhouse.com to learn more.

L i

The R2 Library offers a unique model for health science digital content enabling you to select and purchase only the resources you need through a topic-based, navigable, highly searchable database.

For more information and to start your free 30-day trial today, visit www.rittenhouse.com and click on the “R2 Library” link.