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# Reflections on a Residency: How I Adopted a Student-Centered Approach to Teaching

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## Abstract

This reflective piece describes the author's experience as a faculty engagement librarian at the University of Alberta library as part of the library's residency program. Delving into the challenges of transitioning from a library master's program to the workforce and ensuing feelings of imposter syndrome, the author shares their journey of transitioning from a presentation-focused teaching style to a student-centered teaching approach.

*Keywords*: Student-centered learning, imposter syndrome, school-to-work transition, academic librarianship, library instruction

For the past year, I've been working as a faculty engagement librarian at the University of Alberta library as part of the library's residency program. The residency is an opportunity for recent MLIS graduates to gain experience working in an academic library. Faculty Engagement (FE) involves acting as a liaison between departments at the university and the library. The responsibilities include consultation and reference, outreach to faculty, and teaching and instruction. This latter responsibility excited and intimidated me when I began my role.

I felt that my master's program provided me with knowledge of information systems and reference work, but it didn't prepare me for the kind of autonomy I had as an FE librarian and the tasks I was expected to balance in conjunction with one another. The MLIS program I attended set up a world of orderliness, where libraries are well-

organized systems in which complex questions can be answered with clear results. I thought teaching would be like that.

Second only to group projects, presentations filled most of my time as an MLIS student. A good presentation requires preparation. You have to take the listener on a journey. You have a project to explain, and a variety of components that need to be described in order for that project to come through. With lucid explication, you have to delineate each node and illuminate every shadow of confusion. This was my approach to teaching at the start. I prepared immensely and tried to account for all possible outcomes and questions in advance. I had prepared sample searches, reviewed the topics for the research assignment the professor had shared with me, and run through my slides again and again in preparation.

My first ever class, I showed up to the classroom 30 minutes early. I was ready to give the presentation of a lifetime. I wanted to have everything ready. The laptop would be plugged into the projector, the projector would be tested to make sure it worked, and I would learn how to navigate between the laptop and the projector screen. However, when I got there, the room was empty and dark. The professor wasn't there. I flicked the light switch, turned on the projector, and plugged in my laptop. I prepared my presentation and even pulled up the webpage I was planning to reference throughout my session—we all know that clicking a link on a PowerPoint presentation produces an awkward dead moment. But this presentation was full! There was so much to discuss, so much to impart. There I was, everything ready, and the class still didn't start for 20 minutes. I sat and reread my notes, looked through my slides, and refreshed the webpage so it didn't time out. Soon some students started to trickle in. A couple glanced my way as they entered, trying to hide their small hunches of confusion that something today was different. The professor wasn't here yet, and I didn't know when they would be coming. Would they be giving an introduction to the class? Would I have to call the class to action? Should I do a land acknowledgement?

This is a snapshot of the many worries that filled my head before a class. What I quickly realized, however, is that teaching isn't the same as giving a presentation. It's an opportunity to engage with students with the hope that they will walk away even slightly more confident about their abilities to effectively conduct research. The issue was that I

wasn't confident in my teaching abilities. My experience fresh out of library school was mostly in digitization, metadata, and reference work; I had very little experience teaching. As a result, I was experiencing imposter syndrome.

Imposter syndrome is when an individual feels that they will be exposed as a fraud, despite their actual qualifications and knowledge (Martinez & Forrey, 2019). This feeling is particularly prescient for early career librarians, many of whom feel that library school did not prepare them effectively for the transition to the workforce (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017).

Being the newest and least experienced librarian among seasoned liaison librarians enhanced the feeling that I was 'out of my depth'. I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to fulfill the expectations of my colleagues, supervisors, faculty, and students. I was inexperienced, which is not the same as being unqualified for a role (Rakestraw, 2017). Teaching as a librarian is particularly difficult as we are often only given a single session (known as 'one-shots') to impart foundational research skills. In regard to teaching duties, Martinez and Forrey (2019) note that librarians feel imposter syndrome most strongly when they are "put in front of a group of undergraduates [and] expected to impart some form of wisdom" (p. 332). This can be intensified by the fact that teaching and instruction are typically just a portion of the sometimes ambiguously scoped duties of liaison librarians, who often cover multiple areas each with unique needs (Lacey & Parlette-Stewart, 2017). Balancing teaching with other responsibilities proved challenging, but there were some strategies that were helpful in overcoming my imposter syndrome.

For one, colleague and mentor support was enormously helpful. I reached out to other librarians in my unit and asked to shadow some of their classes; this gave me insight into different styles of teaching one-shot sessions. I had numerous opportunities to co-teach classes which assisted in building my confidence in the classroom. Additionally, discussing teaching practices and strategies with colleagues was helpful, as it emphasized differing approaches to one-shot instruction, while also highlighting common throughlines. Lacey and Parlette-Stewart (2017) have discussed the efficacy of developing a supportive network in overcoming imposter syndrome. My institution

recently launched a teaching and learning community of practice within the library, which provided additional opportunities for idea sharing and support among librarians.

Support was also available through the university's Center for Teaching and Learning. I attended numerous sessions focused on different aspects of teaching including accessibility, active learning strategies, and writing effective learning outcomes, among other topics. While these sessions were not aimed specifically at instructional librarians, they still provided me with a solid foundation in teaching practices and encouraged me to think critically about my own developing teaching strategies.

However, continued practice in teaching was the most effective way of mitigating my sense of being an imposter. When I think back to those first classes I taught, I realize that I was so fixated on appearing to be an expert that I lacked openness to what students brought to the class. In the past year, I have embraced a student-centered approach. This approach is in line with constructivism, which understands teaching as a process of "social exchange" emphasizing the interaction between teachers and students (Anna et al., 2023, p. 72). By incorporating interactive activities that directly support class assignments, student engagement during sessions has significantly improved. This approach also supports students to build information literacy skills related to their discipline.

My favorite thing to say to students is that research is iterative. What I have learned is that teaching is also iterative. While my first teaching sessions were marked by a unidirectional form of lecturing, they now include moments of interaction. Opening up spaces like these allows for more student-librarian interactions where I can help them explore their questions. I now know that you don't have to fill up students' brains. In fact, their brains are already perhaps a little too full. The dead time that opening a PowerPoint link provides is usually when a student will raise their hand. Now when I'm teaching, I make an effort to chat with students before the session 'officially' begins. I don't pre-load webpages—I make sure I click the link in the PowerPoint and wait a good 30 seconds for the page to load. And if the Wi-Fi doesn't work in the room because a class is three stories underground in a concrete building, so be it, that just gives them more time to ask questions.

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