Real Learning Connections: Questioning the Learner in the LIS Internship

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Abstract:

The focus of literature on the role of internship has been on whether and how such activity benefits the student. A model is proposed that examines what happens for both the practitioner supervisor and the LIS educator during an internship experience. Is it possible that all participants learn from the experience and how can that learning be characterized? The results from a three year-long case study are shared.

Keywords: Library and Information Science | LIS Education | Librarianship | Internships | Theory | Practice

Article:

Introduction

The role of practical experience in library and information science (LIS) education has been debated since the founding of the first library school in 1928. In the mid-2000's the debate raged again in response to the emergence of Ischools and the seeming loss of connection to the standards of library science. At that time there was concern about whether I-school graduates would be able to fill standard library roles such as cataloging materials and providing reference service (Dillon & Norris, 2005; Wallace D.P, 2009). The economic situation has revived the debate again as there is pressure to degrade the value of the master's degree both by employers hiring paraprofessionals to perform technology related duties (Manley, 2012) and recruiting those with more advanced degrees to be subject specialists in university collections (Trzeciak, MacLachlan, & Shenker, 2011).

The debate between theoretical knowledge constructed and taught in the academy and the knowledge that is gained through experience is not unique to LIS, often erupting in disciplines as disparate as counseling, business, and design. One of the most profound studies of this divide was done in the 1980's by Donald Schön and his associates (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Schön, 1987). Schön writes about the value for students engaging both the "hard ground" of academic problems that are based on theory and technique and the "confusing problems that defy technical solutions" found in practice (Schön, 1987, p.3). He and other educators (Dewey,

1938; Kolb, 1984) have proposed that experiential learning opportunities as the best model for education. Real Learning Connections, the subject of this paper, is a project that sits at the intersection between confusing problems and hard theoretical approaches. We describe a three year long case study of the project which is a unique collaboration between the Department of Library and Information Studies and the University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. We examine evidence that verifies a new model of internship opportunities that better meet the needs of all three participants in the experience: the instructor, the student, and the library professional.

Literature Review

In order to consider the effects of internships on all of the participants, we will look at three areas of the literature. We first consider the different roles played by librarians and library and information science (LIS) program faculty through the history of practical work in LIS education. In the second section we look at how the student learns about the profession through experiential education. Finally, we will look at the practitioner and the relationship between length of service and burnout.

LIS Education as a Learning Enterprise

The gap between practice and education is a long-standing issue that has erupted at different times in LIS related professions including in an article by Michael Stephens (2013). As was documented in a comprehensive bibliography prepared for the Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Making It Real!" (Gosart, 2007) approximately every 20 years library educators and librarians question the relative value and purpose of practical experience in comparison to classroom instruction and exposure to theory. As Wallace notes, as soon as the Masters degree program was established in 1928 at the University of Chicago, practitioners were wondering if a "science" of librarianship was even needed (CS Thompson as cited in Wallace, 2009). At that time, librarianship was emerging from a required field work model of library school instruction, where students were required to spend several weeks during the curriculum working in a library (Stallman, 1954). Critics like Charles C. Williamson noted that these weeks were often empty with little connection to the curriculum and placements that seemed to be at the convenience of either the library or the school with little regard for the student (1923).

As Stoffle and Leeder (2005) point out there is a difference between education and training; education is focused on the generalities of a profession but training is for the tasks of a specific job. Another way to look at the difference is that education is about knowing and training is about doing (Vassallo, 2005). Library employers want to hire librarians who can do the tasks needed by their particular institution, while LIS educators hope to cover theory and leave the training in particular tasks to the future employer. Yet, practical work is not absent from LIS curricula; it can be either credit-bearing, often called either practica or internships, or extra-curricular such as part-time work. In this paper, we will use the terms internship and practicum interchangeably, even though there are subtle differences that depend on the institution. Recently, a move toward embedding practical work into classes as either observations or projects has emerged, especially in the form of service learning (Ball, 2008; Roy, Jensen, & Meyers,

2009). Even so, no practical experiential course, or even experience, is prescribed by the American Library Association Committee on Accreditation standards, despite the fact that it has been included in many programs over the years (2008). A review of articles that have documented the presence of such a requirement in curricula showed that the practicum remains an elective for most MLS programs (Bird, Chu, & Oguz, 2011).

The American Library Association released a new set of guidelines about what an LIS graduate should know in a document called *ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship* (2009). The document unleashed a new round of discussion about what the learning objectives of LIS curricula were and how they prepare new graduates for the present library environment. Michael Gorman led the charge by decrying the failure of LIS education to prepare students for work in the 21st century and ignoring the core work of librarians such as cataloging, reference, and collection development (2004). He called for a new commitment to library oriented values in the LIS curriculum. Studies of what was actually being taught in the curricula called Gorman's criticism into question (Chow, Teresa Shaw, Gwynn, Martensen, & Howard, 2011; Creel & Pollicino, 2012; Dillon & Norris, 2005).

Further complicating the discussion of curriculum change was the emergence of I-schools, many of which were built around Master's programs for library science but expanded to include a stronger emphasis on information science and technology, media studies, and communication. Many programs started bachelor's degree programs that prepared students for work with information technology in private firms or perhaps in libraries as technology support staff. The faculty members at these institutions were recruited to support that broader mission and have come from an increasingly wider array of disciplines. Information practices that are embedded in library institutions can appear to be absent from the curriculum and leave students feeling unprepared for the work that that they will have to perform in the field (Creel, 2012).

Bill Crowley thoroughly examines the academic-practitioner divide and proposes three remedies to span it (2005). He writes that faculty could help practitioners with literature reviews that would be aimed at the real problems that they face. Librarians could use those to create evaluation or assessment activities that have a theoretical basis. Researchers could conduct interviews with librarians about best practices and use those results in their classrooms. Crowley's last suggestion is that faculty and librarians could make tangible the tacit knowledge used in organizations thereby informing a stronger basis to library science.

Students as Learners

The methods for obtaining practical experience in LIS education have not changed much since Reece (1933) listed class presentation, laboratory work, problem sets, projects, observation, and field experience as ways for students to apply theory to real problems. Collectively known as experiential learning, these activities allow the learner to be actively engaged. When focused on the actions of the learner, Kolb (1984) notes that the learner must be actively involved and willing to reflect on the experience. In a report of a survey of recent graduates about the usefulness of a cataloging practicum, respondents were split about their internship experiences (Damasco & McGurr, 2008). When asked whether the practicum that they participated in "prepared you for your first library job after graduation", a small majority said no but in their

open-ended statements explaining their answers, respondents wrote that their internships had been primarily oriented toward copy cataloging or other specific duties while the job that they attained had a much broader scope. In other words, the experiences were very task oriented and not connected strongly enough to more general aspects of cataloging. In addition, there was no attempt to have the student reflect on how the tasks might be part of the larger enterprise. Even when the experience is less than needed, however, students still feel that their chances for job opportunities are enhanced when they have been given an opportunity for practical experience (Glassman, 2011).

Reflection in professional education is an important tool for reaching what Donald Schön (1987) calls "artistry." A professional makes independent judgments and decisions that rely on integrating theoretical knowledge with the problem at hand and does it in such a way that from the outside it appears to be creatively seamless, or artistic. Written reflection near to the time of the action helps a newcomer to a professional field capture "knowing in-action" and to improve upon it so that it eventually becomes part of a professional's "knowledge-in-action" (Schön, 1987, p. 26–31). Schön assumes that the knowledge and expertise in the workplaces that he examined was held by either the instructor/professor or the practitioner/supervisor of the internship that the students completed. This may be true in more static professions, but may not be so in the fast changing LIS world where many faculty members no longer practice, the practitioners have not been in the classroom in a long time, and the student is more versed in current technologies. For example, the practitioner may have more organizational knowledge, while the student has better understanding of certain tools such as screencasting, and the faculty member may contribute understanding of theory and research methods. Each party to the interaction has something to learn in the arena surrounding the internship.

Schön's epistomology of practice and the use of reflection have been verified for adult students and workers in a variety of fields (Beckett & Hager, 2000; Ferry & Ross-Gordon, 1998). In LIS education Edwards (2010) used Schön's work as a prism to examine the use of reflective practice in service learning. Sen and Ford (2009) developed a new model of student learning with reflective journals that emphasizes analysis of the Situation (S), the evidence (E), and the Action (A). These studies show the importance of the student incorporating experiential education into LIS education using reflective journaling as a base.

Librarians as Learners

Students are the focus of most internship studies. Little has been done to examine the role of the supervisor, although a study by Dahl (2011) looked at the mentoring of undergraduate students from non-LIS fields in library hosted internship experiences given academic credit by the disciplinary department. For example, the library might host an archives intern from the undergraduate history department. Although Dahl has advice for the hosting practitioner about creating learning goals for the student, the effect of the internship on the host librarian is left unexplored. Yet, there are reasons for the librarian to be open to learning during the internship. As Schön notes:

> In some fields, the question of professional artistry has come up in the context of continuing education. Educators ask how mature professionals can be helped to renew

themselves so as to avoid 'burnout,' how they can be helped to build their repertoires of skills and understandings on a continuing basis." (Schön, 1983, p. 15)

Librarians are especially susceptible to burnout because they are in a rapidly changing field dominated by the use of technology (Lewis, 2002). The profession is also aging with many academic librarians more than twenty years removed from the awarding of their MLIS (Moran, Marshall, & Rathbun-Grubb, 2010; Wilder & Association of Research Libraries, 1995). Additionally, many academic librarians have the added burden of tenure seeking with requirements for publishing.

Summary

In the past, practitioner/librarians and academics have argued about the rightful place of theory and practice in the education of new professionals. At this juncture, the American Library Association still does not require a practicum/internship/field work experience in order to obtain an accredited master's degree. Yet, there are continued calls from practitioners to do so. Properly designed experiential learning opportunities for students can lead to participant learning but no benefits accrue to the LIS faculty member or the librarian practitioner.

Problem Statement and Model

The Real Learning Connections project was patterned after the internships created for the *Making It Real!* project in New York (Stauffer, S., 2006). The authors, the Chair of the Department of Library and Information Studies and the Dean of the University Libraries envisioned a joint program of specially designed internships that might alleviate the conjoined problems of academic isolation, practitioner burnout, and student unpreparedness for the workplace. The program called for the creation of a new model that showed interaction between all three parties (see Figure 1). At the interstices of the model are the areas of concern that will be affected by the interaction between the participants. Academic content is both what the practitioners learned in their own programs of study and the content of the DLIS curriculum. Practical work experience is the nature of the tasks completed. Current theory and research are both the work of the faculty member involved and a connection to the literature. The guiding questions for the research reported here are:

1. Will the Real Learning Connections projects show benefits to the student, the librarian/practitioner, and the faculty/ LIS program?

2. Are these benefits visible in the areas identified in the model: academic content, practical work experience, and current theory and research?
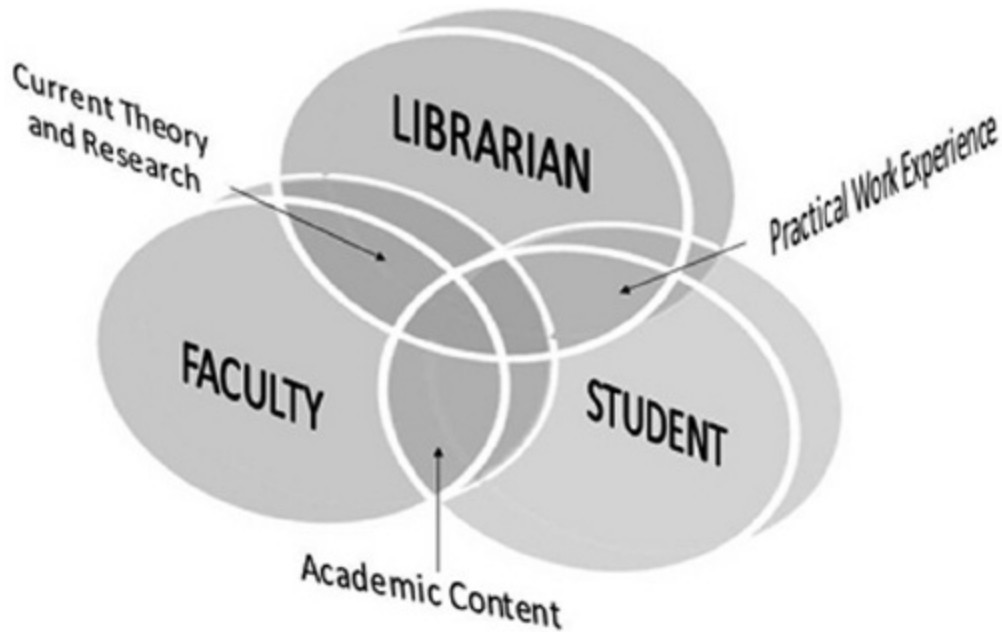
Figure 1.

Method and Participants

A case study approach was taken in order to document the relationships prescribed within the model and to collect evidence of the interstitial areas. Administratively, the internships were created by combining a Department of Library and Information Studies (DLIS) tuition waiver for one year and a monthly stipend from the University Libraries equal to that of a departmental graduate assistantship. Table 1 summarizes the participants in the project, including nine librarians, archivists, or technology specialists and eight students. Although two departments were involved more than once, each time a different employee was part of the project. The projects were proposed by the librarians and their department heads and chosen by the library administration.

The students applied for the positions with an emphasis on their desired career path. The Master's of Library and Information Studies is a generalist degree, with no specialties, except school licensure. Each student was recruited by a general invitation email to apply for the Real Learning Connections internship and to work for a particular project. Students had to have taken all of the core courses. Candidates were chosen after resume review and interview by the librarians in consultation with the participating faculty member. The students were encouraged to take particular courses being offered in each semester of the years indicated. Although only one faculty member (one of the authors) was involved in all three years, other DLIS faculty were consulted about some aspects of the projects as they unfolded. Both authors were participant observers in the case study, keeping in touch with all participants through meetings, email, and reports.

The type of evidence collected evolved as the project unfolded. In every year, each participant created their own learning objectives. In the first year, reflections were collected in journals, in

mid-year reviews, and in final reports along with a list of products created. In the second year, only the mid-term and final reports were collected with the addition of a summary presentation on the project by each member of each team. Reports were in answer to prompt questions, such as, "Did you find any disparity between academic and practical activity?" In the third year, the midterm and final report were completed with the addition of a critical incident question on that report. The artifacts were analyzed by a close reading of the texts by both researchers and they looked for evidence of practical work experience, academic content, and current theory and research as guided by the model (Creswell, 1998; Watson, 2001).

Findings and Discussion

In this discussion some details about the participants have been changed to protect their identities. We will use the interstices of the model as topic headings to illuminate the experiences of the participants in the project.

Academic Content: Learning

Unlike a traditional student-centered experiential learning activity, learning goals were fashioned by each of the participants. The learning objectives were not supervised, nor was there a format or parameters imposed, or any training provided to the participants on how to create them. In the first year, this lack of training was most problematic. For example, the learning objectives of one of the librarian participants focused more on what she would teach the student and not what she, herself, would learn. She wrote, "Provide a complete and thorough internship experience for [the student])." In contrast, one student-librarian pair shared the same learning objective, they each wrote "Work with & learn from [each other] on several projects . . ."Another problem with the learning objectives of all participants was that they tended to be focused more on tasks or on what would be considered low level learning as rated on Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). For example, words like "complete", "gain experience", "become familiar with" were used rather than higher level words like apply, analyze, and create.

For the practitioners, the content from the matched courses as listed in Table 1 was useful for helping them frame their own previously learned knowledge and squaring it with present practice. As one participant wrote "Because of the educational facet of this project, I was not able to simply assign [the student] projects without having discussions about the reasons undergirding the policies and procedures." It was not only previous learning that was important, new knowledge exchange occurred too, as the students brought in information from other classes they were taking. One librarian wrote, "I learned a considerable amount about music librarianship and the needs of users coming in from a musical perspective or discipline. This will be beneficial in the future as the performing arts are one of our priority areas . . ." Without the explicit requirement to engage with students about what they were learning in the classroom, student to practitioner teaching may not have occurred. In Schön's (1987) discussion of the design education process, he describes how the student and the teacher interact to achieve both learning and product. In his writing, he assumes that the expertise resides in the teacher, either the academic professor or the practitioner, and the students are the ultimate recipient of the knowledge and skills that they need. In the two examples above, however, there is a decided advantage to acknowledging and incorporating the separate expertise of the student

into the process. Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001). For example, words like "complete", "gain experience", "become familiar with" were used rather than higher level words like apply, analyze, and create.

In regards to the practitioner-faculty relationship, the practitioners were frustrated by the lack of direct contact with the faculty members teaching the related content. Yet, the DLIS curriculum as a whole benefitted from this review by the practitioners. The academic content of some of the DLIS courses was found wanting by the practitioners and they assigned extra readings to the students. These concerns were shared with the departmental curriculum committee and some changes to specific courses were proposed. Especially when the curriculum did not have a particular course that would match a particular project, the faculty member read independent study materials along with the student.

Table 1. Real Learning Connections Participants and Projects by Year.

Academic Year	Librarian Supervisor Department	Projects	Academic Course Match	Faculty Participant Focus
2010–11	Special Collections University Archives	University archive processing and reference	Independent Study	Collection Management
	Electronic Resources and Information Technology	Instructional Technology Toolkit for librarians	LIS 635 Media Production Services for Library Programs	Information Sources and Services
2011–12	Special Collections University Archives	Oral History Collection	Independent Study	Oral History in Academic Libraries
	Electronic Resources and Information Technology*	Digital Collection on Cello Music	LIS 644 Digital Collections	Digital Collections
	Administration	Assessment Activities	LIS 650 Library Management	Assessment in Academic Libraries
2012–13	Special Collections University Archives	Arranging artifact collection	LIS 640 Organizing Library Collections	Revised course focusing more broadly on GLAM institutions
	Digital Media Commons	Establishment of a new service	LIS 635 Media Production Services for Library	Implications of Digital Media Commons for LIS education

			Programs	
	Cataloging and Technical Services (2)	Instituting new ILS	LIS 640 Organizing Library Collections	Discovery systems and their impact on library workflows

*Other library staff consulted on this project including a music cataloger, an archivist, and a metadata cataloger.

Student and faculty member interactions were not confined to the established curriculum. Although the students were sometimes enrolled in the participating faculty member's classes, there were times when independent study opportunities substituted instead. During these experiences, the faculty participant was introduced to new material, outside her expertise. For instance, she did learn enough about archival and special collections practice from her involvement in the projects to incorporate parts of that theory into the general collection management and digital libraries classes that she teaches. She also added material into her digital libraries course about digitization of musical materials and metadata learned from the cello music project.

As an administrator, the other author of the article was an integral part of the assessment projects and he was able to monitor the progress of all of the projects. He was especially interested in and learned how to encourage continuing education for the library faculty and staff by helping them craft appropriate learning goals and to supervise the learning of the students. In addition, through the instructional technology and digital media commons projects, the skills set needed for these emerging library arenas were better understood and refined. The focus on the digital media common has continued for 2013–2014.

Practical Work Experience: Product

A number of products were produced with these projects and the students and librarians involved point to those with pride. They included a digital collection, transcribed oral histories, finding aids, and numerous library assessments. Having an entire year to focus on these particular projects was pointed to as more useful than the typical practicum experience. Many of these products were shared with other practitioners at conference presentations. In addition, many are permanent features in the library or had a lasting impact on the procedures of the participating library units.

Products are created in most experiential learning opportunities but many of the participants valued the depth of the collaboration and the collegial relationship that was formed. One student wrote,

> By virtue of experience, [my supervisor] was able to offer advice and a different perspective when needed. If I had been working off the concepts I had learned in class, I believe that I would have been able to complete the project, but I do not believe that the result would have been of as high quality. (Participant, Year 2012–13)

Her supervisor had this to say about the same project, organization of special collections artifacts:

> It has truly been a partnership between [the student] and me, with each of us acting as both "educator" and "learner." [The student] has been able to provide true insight to the organization and processing of the collection in a way I wouldn't have thought possible. I hope that I have provided information about my own experiences regarding processing archival collections and reflections of how it related to my own experience in library school. (Participant, 2012–13)

Similar relationships developed in the first year in the production of a toolkit of instructional technology resources. The librarian had the vision of what this might be and the student had experience and a prior degree in instructional technology. The two disciplines seemed at odds with each other and the student felt that it was necessary for the collaborators to bridge that gulf. These successful results were only possible if, "the student is treated like an employee rather than a student worker" (Participant, 2010–11) and that it is built on respect. As one participant wrote, "Respect of the student is critical to get these positive results." (Participant, 2010-11).

Current Theory and Research

The Real Learning Connections model depicted current theory and research as primarily a connection between the practitioner and the DLIS faculty member. At the outset, it was considered especially important to foster this relationship because the librarians are tenure earning as well as the DLIS faculty. There was less research collaboration than hoped for but both sides felt that there was better communication between librarians and the department.

> Engaging theory did help the librarians question their own practices by revisiting theoretical approaches. As Schön (1987) notes, applying artistry means to question the accepted practice. One librarian wrote, "This [the educational role embedded in the internship] led me to make connections and to find disconnects between my theories and my practices. It is good to have to reexamine and revise policies." (Participant, 2011–12)

The readings that were assigned by practitioners because of gaps in the curriculum were also useful to proposing research projects for both the students and the practitioners. Literature reviews and environmental scans were done by the students and those might form the basis for articles written by the practitioners in the future. They certainly helped the assessment projects for the library proceed. And several of the students presented their work at conferences.

The most productive research relationship is the one that produced this article.
The collaboration between the authors has resulted in numerous conversations about the theoretical underpinnings of internships and how students can become competent librarians. It has also led to research on other workforce issues that resulted in several publications.

Conclusions and Future Work

Real Learning Connections Project results demonstrate that there is value in paying attention to the learning effects on all of the participants in an internship experience. Designing experiences that adhere to the model can lead to cooperation between academic LIS department faculty and librarian practitioners to both educate and learn from the graduate student that they are mutually supporting. In addition, LIS faculty can learn from librarians about new problems and tasks that they face and this can be used to change the curriculum to meet those needs. Librarians can ask themselves about the disjuncture between theory and practice and ask themselves if research can help them make better decisions. Indeed, the project itself yielded valuable research that informs library training, LIS pedagogy, and further work on supervision of interns.

Some aspects of the program may not translate to other situations, for instance, the ability to pay a stipend and tuition waiver may be unique to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Yet, there are many elements that can be employed in other LIS programs and other internship experiences. The openness of the faculty member supervisor to be engaged in internship and practicum placement can help influence the renewal of the curriculum with current practice. Librarian supervisors should be encouraged to critique the preparation of the students and to suggest readings and coursework changes that might be used in the preparation of syllabi. Another easily adopted feature might be to encourage librarian supervisors for every internship to engage in more reflective practice as they are training and interacting with the practicum student. Students can be taught to reflect on their learning (Edwards, 2010; Sen and Ford, 2009) and can be helped to work toward artistry in their future endeavors (Schön, 1987).

Future plans include a toolkit for implementation of Real Learning Connections internships, with or without stipends, is planned in the near future. The model has also been used in a classroom setting for a recent community college librarianship course, students were paired with librarians in those institutions as mentors throughout the semester. Mentors and students discussed theoretical approaches from readings and lectures and how they would apply to practical problems. Further research is needed on how this might work for other courses.

Bill Crowley (2005) had several suggestions to bridge the practitioner-library educator divide. The Real Learning Connections project shows what can happen when all parties to an internship relationship are open to learning from and with each other. Replicating some of the pieces from these experiences may go a long way to renewing and strengthening the library profession and the academies that prepare students for it.

Note

Parts of this paper were presented at the 2013 ALISE Annual Conference, Seattle Washington and at the ALISE @ ALA: The ALISE Research Update.

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