Library Confidential: Boundaries and Benefits of Demystifying Student Appointments for Faculty

Kristin Partlo and Ann Zawistoski

Introduction

At Carleton over several years, with major curriculum reform being discussed across the campus, it has became increasingly clear to us that we in the library have important information about the ways that students learn to do research independently throughout their years as undergraduates. Particularly in light of the curricular conversations and our expanding one-on-one student consultation service, we feel that we have insights about students that would be useful to others.

In many senses, the librarians' situation on campus is right on track. We have a great reputation with faculty and are widely known across campus. We have strong relationships with faculty who work with us. Information literacy efforts are growing and are gaining currency. These advances are especially evident in new first year seminars, called Argument and Inquiry (A&I) seminars, that explicitly include information literacy goals and also in growing faculty interest in the library's information literacy assessment rubric. The reference and instruction department sees ample demand in the classroom, in appointments and at the desk and our statistics are steady and rising. What, then is missing?

Like many academic librarians, we realize that our reputation, though strong, is not universally one of peer educators. For many of us, it is a perennial challenge to be seen on our campus as educators as well as service providers. One result of this limited perception of our role is that librarians are not formally included in the campus's curricular conversations. As educators outside the classroom, we have knowledge about students' learning that is distinct from other teaching faculty, which we recognize as valuable to the campus curricular conversation. However, if we are not viewed as teachers but only as service providers, our insights from our work with students are left out of the discussion.

Librarians recognize that it is up to us to advocate for our voice to be included. We need to find ways to communicate to faculty, as a part of our outreach, not just the services we provide and ways we support them, but also that we are educating their students and that we share goals and certain educational approaches and that we have useful information about the learning progress of their students. Our strategy, then, was to take advantage of an informal portion of the curricular conversation in which we had already been participating. In this context we were able to

Kristin Partlo is Reference & Instruction Librarian for Social Sciences and Data at Gould Library, Carleton College, e-mail: kpartlo@carleton.edu; Ann Zawistoski is Reference & Instruction Librarian for Sciences at Gould Library, Carleton College, e-mail: azawisto@carleton.edu. *This article would not have been possible without the insightful discussion and generous sharing of ideas by colleagues in the Reference & Instruction Department of Gould Library, specifically Danya Leebaw and Heather Tompkins who presented the LTC session with us and Iris Jastram who provided ideas all along the way and was a keen reader of drafts.*

begin to make a claim about and formalize a dialog about the contributions librarians can make.

Our Distinct Information

What do we know that the faculty do not? Faculty know their students well. That is something we do not question. They know about students' learning and points of struggle through direct classroom experience over time, through evaluating their work, and through one-one-one interactions in office hours. They also know that a substantial proportion of their students take advantage of the library's research support help, at the desk, through library instruction, and through individual and small group appointments.

Faculty do not, though, have detailed knowledge of why their students come to us, what questions they ask, what struggles they encounter, and what they learn in our presence. Because we are not evaluating them, students let their guard down and do not perform for us in the way they do in their professors' presence. We know that some students are bringing questions to us that they are not comfortable bringing to their instructors. Librarians observe students working on their class work in ways to which their faculty do not have access.

Beyond this extracurricular access to student learning, librarians attain knowledge of student learning in a manner that is similar to but distinct from faculty, giving us a perspective different from faculty in important ways. Whereas any individual faculty member works with students primarily within only their own discipline, librarians work with students across the campus and are in a position to see common struggles. Librarians can see struggles frequently occurring in one particular discipline in the context of the rest of the student body. We gain knowledge of students through our work with them in appointments, at the desk, and in our class visits. Some of this knowledge will overlap with and be consistent with what faculty learn from working with students. However, because of many factors, not least of which include our non-evaluative role and the fact that students come to us voluntarily, we interact with students in a different way, affording us a different relationship with and perspective on their progress.

Finally, the less accurate faculty's idea of how we work with students is, the less they actually do know about the learning that goes on in our presence. When there are misperceptions that librarians just give answers, or that we only give technical directions—in short, that we do not have the knowledge of students one gains only through teaching—faculty will not seek out that information. A major opportunity is lost for keeping everyone informed about students' progress and struggles when faculty don't understand that librarians take a pedagogical approach to their work with students.

This gap of knowledge is not unique to Carleton. It is structural: faculty know intimately about their students with whom they interact directly over time. But when students are learning and receiving assistance outside of that realm, the faculty cannot know what is happening unless it is being explicitly communicated. This situation is then exacerbated when librarians are not seen as colleagues in the educational mission of the college or university and are left out of broader discussions of pedagogy, teaching and learning, and the curriculum.

Traditionally, it has not been a priority of reference and instruction programs to communicate to faculty the questions we receive at the desk, in large part because we value the expectation of privacy that students have in their interactions with us. This need to protect the anonymity of the individual student does not, however, prevent librarians from reporting back the broader patterns that we see while working with their students, patterns that could be useful to faculty in assessment, in adjusting their current classes, or more broadly in identifying what students need to be taught about information literacy. In the end, it is not an issue of what librarians know that faculty don't know, but rather a question of how librarians' unique relationship with students, forged in a non-evaluative framework, can be communicated to faculty in a way that is useful for their instruction? And how can we let faculty know that it is worth engaging with us on this issue?

In recent years, librarians at Carleton have been making gains on the latter point through an increasing presence on campus and involvement in curricular and assessment discussions (that were open to us). This presence has only increased as curricular reform and assessment have become top priorities for the faculty, and are discussed more frequently in mixed fora open to faculty and staff. Presentations given by librarians on the Research Practices Survey (RPS) and various other measures have been slowly strengthening the idea on campus that there are things students are expected to learn, but that they aren't learning evenly across all majors. Several times, conversations ended with faculty saying to us, "We bet you have a lot of data on our students that would be useful to us." And we would agree, but that would be the end of it. Though there was interest from some faculty in learning more from us, there was no obvious next step or forum in which to do so.

Communication Mechanisms

The most obvious formal mechanism the library has for communicating with the rest of campus is outreach. However, it is not clearly the best mechanism for the challenges articulated here. Outreach usually consists of sending out information about the library (e.g., basic information about collections and services, more targeted information about ways liaisons can support classes and research, or more broadly conceived marketing efforts that express the library's character or particular niche in the campus).[1] In this case, we are more interested in giving back than in promotion.

Nevertheless, outreach is one place to begin a dialog and it is a good tool for reinforcing messages being established elsewhere. Because marketing efforts are so powerful in building and enforcing librarians' identity, it is worth thinking of more ways we can use our outreach to this end. Librarians can model good teaching in their day to day work all they want, but if the expectation remains that their expertise is limited to technical and service realms, they won't be perceived as educators.

At Carleton, our participation in the intellectual life of the campus is somewhere between outreach and just a central part of the job of liaison librarians. Librarians make time to attend events aimed primarily at faculty but open to staff. In many cases, just our appearance and the opportunity to listen is what is most important, not that we are able to make any particular statements from the perspective of the library. It was through this type of participation that we saw our opportunity for beginning a dialog on librarians' contribution to the curricular conversation.

Another obvious mechanism for communicating these insights would be through the same channels the faculty use for discussing pedagogical and curricular issues, such as faculty and departmental meetings and the Education and Curriculum Committee. However, as is surely the case with many academic librarians, especially those without faculty status as is the case here, we do not have access to these fora. Instead, we rely on our individual relationships with faculty and participation in various initiatives and faculty development to filter our expertise into these discussions. In this sense we have had rich opportunity to participate informally to the campus dialog.

At Carleton, there is one forum in particular in which we have been informally active for many years. The Learning and Teaching Center (LTC) hosts a popular weekly lunch series of talks, open to both faculty and staff. It is one of the few fora available for large numbers of faculty to talk with each other across departments about their teaching. Staff are always welcome to attend. Presenters are usually faculty or guest speakers and the primary audience is usually faculty. Librarians and other academic support staff do occasionally appear on panels with faculty. As reference and instruction librarians, this is our widest audience and where we can participate most directly with faculty about teaching. It is partially through our participation in these events and our comments in question and answer periods that we know some faculty are interested in pursuing ways to more formally share what librarians learn about students.

Last fall we proposed and were accepted to give a session for an LTC lunch event. We chose to give a presentation to faculty about what exactly happens in library appointments. We played up the mystery, calling it "Library Confidential" and using the hook of "you know your students come to us, but do you know what happens behind closed library doors?" We found faculty were only too eager to know the answer to that question. In the following sections we will describe how we took advantage of this opportunity to demonstrate ourselves and our methods as fellow educators.

Demonstrating a Pedagogical Approach

From the beginning it was our goal to communicate our pedagogical approach not only by talking about it directly but also by demonstrating it through our use of language. We aimed to show that our approach in appointments is guided by our broad learning goals for the students and our understanding of the faculty's learning goals for the students in their class with that particular assignment. We wanted them to understand that we calibrate our sense of how long to search, how much to dig, how much to help and how much to let them struggle based on the particular goals of the assignment (and thus the more they communicate their goals with us the better).

Within the field of librarianship, anyone familiar with the information literacy literature, ACRL immersion programs, and best practices[2] knows that academic librarians' focus is not on handing over answers but in making students independent, reflective researchers. These goals are true at the reference desk, in our instruction classes, and in our one-on-one consultations. Faculty in other disciplines obviously cannot be expected to be familiar with the literature of our field, so it is up to us on our own campuses to help them see that this is the approach. Not only do faculty not know this about us unless we tell them, but it is also best to do so in terms that cross disciplinary boundaries. Instead of talking about our approach in terms of information literacy best practices accepted within our profession, we couch things in terms of broader concepts in the arena of teaching and learning.

Ethics of Pulling Back the Curtain

One of the challenges we faced when deciding what to communicate with the faculty was the question of what we could share without compromising the privacy of our students and our faculty. We value the relationship that we have with our students, that they trust us enough to come to us with questions that they may not feel comfortable discussing with their professors. A large part of the trust in the relationship comes from the fact that we do not grade our students, and they know that we will not report specifics about their visits back to the professors.

Also, given that appointments are almost always driven by assignments, we needed to think about whether or not the assignments should be identifiable from the information we conveyed. Many faculty discuss their assignments in workshops and presentations, and are familiar with each other's assignments. Knowing which assignments drive the most appointments, or lead to specific types of questions could be helpful for our faculty. On the other hand, we do talk about confusions that students have about their assignments, but it isn't our role to challenge professors by pointing out that a specific assignment may have been poorly written or poorly conceived.

Because of these issues, we need to be careful and intentional in deciding how much information to provide about our appointments. Too little and the information might prove too vague to be helpful, yet too much can endanger the trust that we have worked hard to build with our students. The Carleton community is small enough that even demographic statistics can provide enough information at times to identify a student. Stories of specific appointments are even more likely to jeopardize a student's privacy. In many cases, this means that information must be aggregated and anecdotes must be made anonymous before sharing with our faculty.

Overview of the Session

In our presentation for the LTC, we began the conversation by simultaneously addressing misperceptions about librarians and pointing out commonalities in librarian and faculty appointments with students. This was done humorously by presenting a series of images illustrating some common misperceptions about librarians and their approaches to helping students (e.g., that we hand-hold, that we prescribe a singular, universal "right way" of doing research, that we overwhelm students with too many options, and that one should only send students to librarians when they've encountered trouble instead of early in the process). This set us up to first describe what appointments are like, and to then talk about the kind of knowledge we have about students because of those interactions.

After talking about librarians' goals in appointments, we attempted to describe and characterize appointments. We approached the task of description in several ways, in order to provide as rich a narrative as possible. Our approaches included different librarians each discussing a particular type of appointment, a home-grown video of appointment types, and statistics to help paint a picture of just how many students come to us, for what reason and for how long. These approaches will be discussed in more detail below.

Finally, once the room had a good sense of what goes on in appointments and our approach to them, we changed focus to some of the things we learn about students because of our work with them in appointments.

Crafting the Presentation

In order to flesh out the information we presented to faculty, we pulled from a wide range of sources, both qualitative and quantitative. We found that we have a wealth of information available to us to help paint a rich picture of our students and their research habits and questions from our perspective. We have many ways of tracking our librarian-student interactions as well as a few instruments for assessing what our students currently know. We mined all of these sources for information that would be useful and compelling to the faculty.

Anecdotal description. Well-chosen anecdotes can be quite compelling, so we decided to begin our descriptive section of the presentation using this approach. In order to preserve student privacy, we chose to create composite versions of some types of appointments that would highlight the points we were making. We decided that we could not boil them all down to a few main types. Instead, we listed about a dozen or so common types of appointments and picked three that seemed especially rich for correcting misconceptions and conveying to faculty that we work according to pedagogical goals.

The three appointment types we highlighted were: the technical appointment, which starts out looking for help with a specific tool such as EndNote which provides a jumping off point to talking with students about their research; the data appointment, which involves searching for specific data sets or statistics; and the in depth research appointment, which is often used by our senior students in their final thesis and many times results in finding sources which are not available at our library. As each presenting librarian talked about these appointments and how we approach them, she found ways to work in references to learning goals that our department had recently written to help articulate our approaches[3] for the faculty.

Video vignettes. From the earliest conceptions of the presentation, we wanted to engage the faculty with a real sneak peek into appointments and had discussed enlisting students to perform vignettes with us. In the end we settled on making a video. With the help of a talented student computing worker (who works with us at the student computing help desk, a combined service point with our reference desk), we were able to quickly illustrate three types of referral: a student being referred from the desk to a consultation, a student coming to an appointment and describing how she was referred by her professor, and a student being referred in a library appointment back to her professor.[4] Referral became a focus of this video because it both showed how students end up in appointments, but also how we play a mediating role between students and faculty, helping students clarify where they're struggling so they can return to their professor prepared for a fruitful consultation. We made clear when introducing this section in our presentation that privacy is something we value and that our examples were composites. These short vignettes set the scene for the rest of the discussion. We anticipated that faculty would both feel the mystique of seeing students in a place they can't normally access, but simultaneously find the setting very familiar to their office hours. Librarians are thus presented as doing work similar to faculty, not just pointing from a desk. Not least important, we elicited some laughter that helped us win over the room.

Appointment statistics. We keep statistics about each one-on-one reference appointment.[5] Along with the number of appointments, we track the year of the student, the department of the class out of which the question arises, and whether or not the question is related to a class and, if so, whether or not we provided instruction for that class. This gives us quick demographic data to describe who is coming to see us for appointments, how many appointments we have, and when in the academic term they occur. We specifically presented the number of student consultations that we have, contrasted with the number of classes we teach, and the number of questions we get at the reference desk. We also explored which times of year different appointments occur, for instance, our senior thesis questions come in the winter, while most questions from first year students come in the fall.

Surveys. We also provided results from a few surveys that we had done at Carleton. The first was the Research Practices Survey (RPS),[6] which is administered to incoming students before they get to campus, and then again at the end of their first Spring term. The survey asks students about their attitudes and behaviors in relation to research. This survey provided us with a means to demonstrate some of the questions and confusions that students bring to us. Specifically, we were able to show which parts of research students report as being difficult, how students say they evaluate sources, and some of the confusions students have when reading a citation.

Writing portfolios. Another place we found great insight into our student's information literacy was their sophomore writing portfolios. These portfolios are submitted by sophomores every year as a graduation requirement. The portfolios are not originally designed to assess the information literacy of students, but they provided such rich insight into student writing that we began reading them with an eye towards information literacy. A couple of years before this session, we designed a rubric that evaluated how students chose and used sources. While that rubric is still being developed, we shared both the rubric and some of our preliminary findings with faculty. Just the discussion of the rubric helped to convince faculty of our rigor and pedagological approach to working with students. Seeing how we evaluate student writing helped them to see what it is that we hope to teach our students during our appointments. The results of our readings reinforced our descriptions of the types of questions and difficulties we see in our students.[7]

Qualitative survey. Even with all of the sources of information that we identified, we found that we still lacked one critical voice in our stories: that of our students. To rectify that, a few months before our presentation, we sent a small scale questionnaire to students who had met with us during the Fall 2009 term. The survey was short: we asked students what led them to make an appointment with us, their expectations for the appointment, whether those expectations were met, and one thing they learned at the appointment that was useful in completing their assignment. This was a very preliminary survey, with only 25 respondents, but it did give us an opportunity to see and share how students describe our appointments in their own words.

Continuing the Discussion

The presentation was a singular event, but the information and insights that we have are not static and if we want to be a continuing part of the campus conversation, then the information we share needs to be systematized and communicated throughout the year. As we think beyond the question of what can be communicated in a onetime presentation, all of the considerations listed above about venues, language, and shared interests remain relevant.

While we pulled only quick demographic data from LibStats for our presentation, we track far more than we shared. The statistics that we keep on our appointments contain a wealth of information that could be useful to our faculty as they continue to discuss curricular questions and assess their teaching. For instance, we record the question and our response along with information about the class that the student was taking. If we were to monitor the data as it is collected, we could potentially alert faculty to patterns of questions and confusions that we're seeing at the desk or in appointments. We could provide information on when in the course of an assignment or class, students seem to struggle, and which information literacies our students possess and when those skills were acquired.

But this is an area where the above mentioned ethical questions really arise. Are there good ways to let faculty know about questions without giving away the identity of the students asking them? When is it appropriate to let faculty know that students have visited you and when not? If we are going to communicate more of the information that we collect as part of our statistics, will we need to be more explicit with our students that we keep this information and might share it? Will that lead to an erosion of the trust that we have built up with our students? We don't have the answers to these questions yet, but feel we're in a better position to explore these questions with our faculty.

Lessons

Our presentation was well attended and, we feel, successful in starting a conversation with the faculty about what information we have to offer as well as the ethical issues around sharing details about student appointments on an ongoing basis. We had hoped that this presentation would not only open a dialog with our professors about the information we have that they may find valuable, but also that the faculty would leave with a better understanding of how we as librarians work with their students. Since the presentation, we have noticed an increase in requests from faculty for us to visit classes and/or meet one-on-one with their students for assignments. We have had more interactions with members of the faculty, particularly those that we hadn't interacted with as much before. We have also been invited to participate in more of the campus discussions around implementing the new first year seminars and graduation requirements, and around assessment on campus.

We don't consider this paper to have laid out any specific recipe for success in introducing faculty to the specific knowledge that librarians have. Each institution is too different, with its own specific culture and context. But we expect that other libraries may face challenges similar to those listed below in trying to communicate our teaching roles and experiences with our faculty. We hope that the lessons we've learned can be transferred to other situations in the abstract, if not in detail.

- Find the best venue for a dialog, based on avenues that your faculty already use to share with one another. For us, this was our Learning and Teaching Center, which is often looking for topics for their lunchtime discussions.
- Pay attention to the top questions and issues on your campus. What are your faculty talking about or grappling with right now? Can the information you have help your faculty think about those questions? Frame the discussions around those topics if possible.
- Decide on just a few key points or questions to focus on for any one discussion, but be ready to talk about many other topics as the conversation unfolds.
- Make an inventory of the tools you have and the information you are already gathering to pull together a compelling story that you want to tell. Are there any ways to quickly add a missing point of view similar to our quick survey of student opinion?
- Use the language and communication styles that your faculty use in talking about teaching and learning on campus.

Conclusion

Librarians have unique insights into student learning that could be a valuable voice on campuses grappling with goals for student learning and information and other literacies. However, faculty are often not aware of some of the information we could share, due both to our not being seen as colleagues in teaching, but also because we don't always look for ways to share it. But sharing our insights in a formalized way can help establish our domain of expertise in teaching and learning, while at the same time, providing useful insights for campus discussions. In the absence of formal modes of communication, we need to establish narratives that present our roles and assert our expertise to the campus.

Notes

1. An example of that broader marketing is our own success at Carleton with librarian trading cards to express to students a playfulness in our approach, to let them know that we are experts who don't take ourselves too seriously.

2. Beth S. Woodard, "One-on-one Instruction: From the Reference Desk to Online Chat, *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (2005): 203–209.

3. Carleton College Laurence McKinley Gould Library Reference and Instruction Department, "Six Big (and 38 Little) Information Literacy Questions: Getting Students Beyond Google and JSTOR," Carleton College, last modified 2008, accessed January 10, 2011, http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/library/assets/List_of_6.pdf.

4. Carleton College Laurence McKinley Gould Library Reference and Instruction Department, "Three Library Vignettes," Carleton College, last modified 2010.

5. At Carleton we use the Libstats system (http://code.google.com/p/libstats/) for keeping reference desk and appointment statistics.

6. Carleton College Laurence McKinley Gould Library Reference and Instruction Department, "Research Practices Survey," Carleton College, last modified October 19, 2010, accessed January 7, 2011, http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/library/about/infolit/projects/research_practices_survey/.

7. Carleton College Laurence McKinley Gould Library Reference and Instruction Department, "Information Literacy in Student Writing: Rubric and Codebook," Carleton College, last modified July 2009, accessed January 7, 2011, http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/library/assets/InfoLit_in_Student_Writing_Rubric_and_Codebook_July_2009.pdf.