THE BUSINESS OF PUBLISHING: 
A Library Information Literacy Workshop 
for Masters Students

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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries play a vital role in developing students’ information-literacy skills. Part of the ACRL Framework sets goals for thinking about information creation as a process; yet, while many instruction programs focus on teaching students about academic publishing practices and critical thinking around how authority is constructed, there is often an unmet need when it comes to teaching the “business” side of publishing—that is, the practical logistics of authors negotiating with editors to make their writing available and receive credit and remuneration for their work. Our team of three librarians at Columbia University (two liaison librarians to professional graduate schools, and one Digital Scholarship specialist) decided to not only design a workshop that would help enhance these skills, but also to conduct research into the workshop’s effectiveness in meeting students’ needs. In this paper, we narrate the genesis and creation of the workshop, share its contents and learning objects, and explore the findings of our research so that our colleagues can learn from our experience and reproduce aspects of this workshop in their home institutions.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

The genesis of the workshop was a discussion among three librarians about the types of questions we sometimes receive about publishing from students in masters-level professional programs at Columbia University. Two of those librarians (Kae Bara Kratcha and Caro Bratnober) are liaison librarians to schools with professional programs, and the third (Michelle E. Wilson) was the Digital Publishing Librarian at Columbia University. Kae and Caro liaise with various professional-level masters programs, which we define as programs that prepare students for a profession outside of academia. These include programs in the School of Professional Studies, Union Theological Seminary, and the School of Social Work. Whereas undergraduates and doctoral students receive embedded library instruction through their coursework, Masters-level students rarely have library instruction guaranteed. While Caro and Kae regularly provide reference consultations and instruction for students in these programs, there was no centralized way for all professional-level students to learn about Columbia Libraries’ publishing services or the expertise of the Libraries’ publishing staff.

That is not to say that publishing services and education were not available at Columbia Libraries. Between 2018 and 2022, Columbia University Libraries provided a robust publishing...
education program. (In late 2022 the Digital Publishing Librarian, Michelle E. Wilson, who organized and ran this program, left the Columbia University Libraries and the position was not immediately refilled. Although the digital scholarship division continues to provide technical services to existing publishing partners, the educational program is largely on hold.) In addition to teaching technical production skills in digital scholarship including a wide range of digital humanities methodologies, journal publication, and podcasting, the program offered workshops, small group instruction, one-on-one consultations, and asynchronous resources to support literacy in the publishing ecosystem. Educational programs within Columbia’s digital scholarship division focused on increasing student awareness of preferred and ethical publishing practices, open access, and author rights. No matter the method of instruction, the goal was the graduate students who navigated the publishing spaces adjacent to academia with confidence and the ability to advocate for themselves and the expansion of equitable practices.

Much of Michelle’s publishing instruction occurred in the context of extracurricular programming and hands-on mentoring for students working as editors on academic journals or in the form of co-curricular workshops for classes creating digital scholarship projects. However, some bespoke instruction was developed for students in graduate programs preparing for academic careers. Workshops for this demographic focused on preparing students to engage in major forms of academic publishing including peer reviewed articles and scholarly monographs. These workshops generally contained content on selecting publishers and publications, understanding the typical publishing workflow, copyright literacy and basic contract negotiation, and maximizing and demonstrating impact.

Publishing inhabits a central role in academic life—yet, while there has been a sustained focus on information literacy with regard to discovering, analyzing, and selecting published research, there is less formal instruction, both in academic curricula as well as in library instruction offerings, to increase knowledge of the processes by which research, including by students, is selected for publication and distributed.

While the Digital Scholarship division’s publishing services and programs were open to professional level masters students, Kae and Caro observed that professional level students were often unaware that the Libraries offered them. Further, many of the programs were more suited to academic writing and publishing than professional or industry writing and publishing, so professional level students may not have felt that the publicly-advertised publishing programs and services were relevant to them. Caro and Kae felt that a publishing workshop that focused on the business concerns of publishing—for example, how writing and publishing can benefit a career in industry, whether publishing is a viable way to make an income, and how to set goals for publishing that align with broader career goals—would be more relevant to professional level students and would present us an opportunity to discuss information creation in a non-academic context. Michelle pointed out that in addition to these topics, professional level students would also benefit from learning about copyright and licensing to better manage their author rights and long-term ability to profit from their writing.

Overall, we collectively bemoaned the lack of skills training in publishing practices that professional level students receive in their graduate programs. We observed that seldom in professional disciplines outside the Humanities do Masters-level students receive instruction about how to find an editor, negotiate a contract, or consider their authorship rights. Many do not know the difference between a license and a copyright, for example, or when to reach out to editors versus when to obtain a literary agent. We see this as an equity issue; students may not have access to their own personal advisors and editors who can grant gatekeeping access to publishing platforms, and such students are thus at an economic disadvantage when it comes time for graduation.

The creation of this workshop stemmed from our general observations about interactions between students in Masters-level programs at Columbia and the Libraries. We observed that students in masters-level professional programs often expressed questions during information literacy workshops about how to publish their work in venues like trade journals or open publications on the web. Graduate schools of professional studies, theology, of education, and of other areas are filled with students who want to publish not in academic publications but in their trade periodicals and even mainstream circulars. Whereas doctoral programs often include a culture of mentorship (formal or informal) in which faculty instruct graduate students in publishing practices, anecdotally, we had each encountered students who would tell us that none of their professors could tell them how to contact a literary agent, or submit a pitch for an article. These students have mentioned that they wished
it were more officially part of the curriculum or concretized in the graduate program in a formal way. We aimed to fill this gap at least in part through the creation of our open workshop for graduate students.

THE INFORMATION-LITERACY AND DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP INSTRUCTION LANDSCAPE

Information literacy instruction in college and university libraries have been guided by the Association of College & Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education ("the Framework") for nearly a decade since its publication. The idea of “Information Creation as a Process” is one of the six core concepts in the Framework; the premise that students have “a greater role and responsibility in creating new knowledge” in the 21st century has directed instruction librarians’ programming towards a focus on students as information creators, not just consumers.1 Critical information literacy, as defined by editors Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins in Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis, “takes into consideration the social, political, economic, and corporate systems that have power and influence over information production, dissemination, access, and consumption.”2 Knowing where published material comes from can be an enriching aspect of developing critical information-literacy awareness, which in turn enhances critical thinking skills necessary in taking action to shape a just social landscape. By creating a platform for students to examine the business side of information-creation as a process, and to examine how they themselves take part in this business, we hoped our workshop would empower students to consider their own roles in the information ecosystem in a critical way.

There are many critical information-literacy benefits for students who engage with librarians in critical instruction and discussion of scholarly communication and the economics of publishing. As Buck and Valentino observed, students “are often unaware of the economic models that drive the price of information creation and access.”3 Yet, while most college-embedded library workshops emphasize the rudimentary processes of finding and evaluating sources in the research process, the nuts and bolts of the publishing from the authors’ perspective—such as finding an editor, signing contracts, and bargaining over licensing agreements—are rarely included in basic library information literacy instruction. Advocating for “publishing literacy” among graduate students, Carisse Berryhill et al argue that “Librarians can help students learn about their rights and responsibilities as authors in the emerging landscape of digital scholarly publishing, whether in nonprofit, for-profit, or open-access repositories and journals, and about threats to their intellectual property from predatory or fraudulent publishers.”4 Through a practical skill-building workshop, we hoped we could develop students’ critical skills while also directing their efforts towards achieving their publishing goals.

There exists a tremendous body of information-literacy pedagogy resources to support librarians who teach scholarly communication. Wonderful new resources have been developed by organizations like the Library Publishing Coalition, such as the Library Publishing Curriculum, the new Scholarly Communications Notebook and a wide variety of materials produced by the Committee on Publication Ethics, although these are less well known outside of those specialist communities. Within the ACRL LibGuides, the Scholarly Communications Toolkit is a continuously updated and edited resource, while the 2013 ACRL Intersections of Scholarly Communication and Information Literacy Roadshow contains some teaching and learning materials that are have not been regularly revised. There are also a smattering of teaching materials in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox under tags such as peer review, impact metrics, and scholarly communication. These resources are highlighted in our Bibliography.

Information creation is well documented as an effective tool to engage students (as well as those outside of academia) with information-literacy; public libraries that provide instructional programming on how to use expressive communication tools have found that a shift towards expressive information creation promotes information and media literacy among users.5 How we write influences how we think about the way others write. Moreover, there is plentiful evidence that focusing on information-creation guides students to articulate, assess, and understand various modes and purposes of information in many formats; focusing on their own writing offers both a platform and an incentive for learning.6 We aimed to teach students about the publishing process and the business side of information-creation through their own writing.
We wanted to design a workshop that would empower these students to engage in critical inquiry around the economic side of publishing—specifically, questions of who makes money from the information-creation process, and how. The hope was that this would both empower them as authors in aiming to be compensated for their written work in the market of publishing, and empower them as students and researchers in the wider information ecosystem. Keeping in mind the ACRL Framework core concept that *information has value*, and in teaching *information creation as a process*, we strived for a workshop in which students would gain critical skills in evaluating the way written work is produced and how to use information in their own research. In some ways, our goal was to create an information-literacy workshop disguised as a money-making workshop. Essentially: our aim was to equip students with even more critical information-literacy skills than they had even signed up for.

**DEVELOPING THE WORKSHOP**

In designing this workshop, we wanted it to be as accessible as possible to a diverse audience of students. We aimed to accommodate a wide variety of learning styles and promote active learning through hands-on activities. With three co-facilitators, harnessing each of our teaching strengths lent itself well to incorporating a variety of pedagogical approaches. We drew on Char Booth's “Four Factors of Learning”—memory, prior knowledge, environment, and motivation—all of which play a role in students’ active participation and (most importantly) retention of information. Getting a sense of the participants’ prior knowledge of the publishing process, for example, and making space in the workshop for them both to share their past experiences and to express their motivations, would be an important foundation to build on during the sessions. We also tried to incorporate Meyer and Land’s “threshold concepts”—that is, transformative and integrative forms of new knowledge which, when encountered through troublesome sticking points, cause the learner to expand on their existing knowledge and break through previous barriers of understanding. In the Business of Publishing workshop, this would involve building upon their existing goals (and, potentially, past unsuccessful experiences) in teaching new skills and building familiarity with the publishing ecosystem.

This project’s inception came during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic; we took it as a given that the workshops would be conducted over Zoom. A wealth of resources for online-teaching exists, yet many instruction staff in libraries felt like they had to “reinvent the wheel” and learn through trial-and-error how to teach in a videoconference instead of a classroom, upon the rapid shift in 2020 when many colleges and universities went remote. We first discussed this new workshop concept in November of 2020, after months of experience teaching online, and with more online pedagogy resources to draw upon. Columbia’s Center for Teaching and Learning maintains a repository of teaching tools, including a resource sheet for active learning in the online classroom, with ideas for activities on Zoom. Of course, having the sessions on Zoom allowed for active participation both verbally and via the chat; the platform lends itself well to accommodating a multitude of communication styles. We were also able to share our various links, handouts, and activities in the chat much more easily than paper or digital files in an in-person classroom.

With our additional aim of collecting qualitative survey data from our workshop participants, we hoped to offer the workshop at least two or three times. This had the added benefit of offering us an iterative design process; each successive time we facilitated the workshop, we could reflect and edit its components. We could omit activities and instructional portions that didn’t seem to “land” or which students reported ineffective in their surveys. And we could also emphasize and stretch-out the modules we wanted more time for. After the first iteration of the workshop, especially, we were glad for the opportunity to edit the agenda.

To collect survey data as part of our research, we embarked on the process of obtaining Independent Review Board (IRB) approval through the appropriate Columbia channels—significantly, it was the first time each of us had gone through the IRB process. At Columbia we are non-tenure-track librarians with no publishing requirement (though we do receive support in terms of applying our time and energy towards research, and it is factored into our performance evaluations as we continue to make contributions in our respective fields). We did not know at the outset how time-consuming getting IRB approval could be, especially composing the exact language to describe our project accurately and fit within the IRB’s requirements. However, we were hopeful that
our research into students’ experience and learning outcomes would benefit the creation and development of improved information-literacy programming.

THE “BUSINESS OF PUBLISHING” WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The workshop was designed to last 90 minutes, including time for pre- and post-workshop surveys among participants, and consist of hands-on activities, discussions, and a 10-minute break (the instructional materials are available openly through Columbia’s institutional repository, Academic Commons). After the pre-workshop survey, we introduced ourselves and gave participants a chance to introduce themselves and say why they were interested in the workshop. Next we discussed “the student as writer,” discussing their desired outcomes and publishing goals. We asked the students to consider different publications and what makes them different, in terms of their editorial processes, their audience, and their copyright/authorship specifications. (For example: what makes publishing an article on Medium.com different from publishing it in The New Yorker?) This functioned both as a warm-up and as an opportunity to develop a shared vocabulary among the participants for the rest of the session.

Next, students participated in an activity guiding them through pitching an article to editors. Together we read through the submissions guidelines for three platforms: Slate, Sojourners, and the Harvard Business Review. We discussed what each publication looks for in submissions, whether writers were paid, and who owned the copyright for published works. After this, participants were guided through a section on authorship opportunities, such as writing “low-barrier” pieces like book reviews and making connections with editors on social media. Together these activities functioned to hone each student’s sense of their own individual goals and potential opportunities, before taking a break, and coming back to discuss copyright and licensing issues.

Michelle led participants in a longer section on copyright after a quick break. Leading with the distinction between copyright and licensing, this section covered how to read an author agreement / Terms of Service document, the long-term implications in signing a contract, and how to consider the income-generating potential of advance, speculation, and other forms of remuneration for authors. Her activity involved sample contracts from different publishers, so students could practice reading actual contracts (like the type they may face the choice to sign one day), and searching for key terms and recognizing their significance.

At multiple points in the workshop students were given the option to write down an individualized goal for themselves—for example, to write down the name of a professor or mentor who they could talk to about publications and recommended platforms. In this way, we hoped, students would leave with tangible concrete steps to take in the next phase of their publishing journey.

ANALYZING THE OUTCOMES

We conducted pre- and post-surveys for the workshop on two occasions—first, in November 2021 and then in March 2022. The pre-survey asked participants to answer five true/false questions and two multiple choice questions, rate their confidence on specific skills addressed in the workshop, and provide a free-text response to the question, ”What is the most important thing you came to this workshop to learn about? Why? (1-2 sentences).” The post-workshop survey asked participants to synthesize their knowledge of the same topics addressed in the true/false and multiple choice questions in free-text short answer responses, rate their confidence on the same abilities listed in the pre-workshop survey, and answer open-ended questions about the content and delivery of the workshop.

In our first workshop in which we administered the survey, we received five pre-workshop survey responses and four post-workshop survey responses. While these are small sample sizes, we were able to reach some conclusions about the participants’ experiences of and takeaways from the workshop. The pre-survey responses indicated that participants were somewhat knowledgeable about whether authors in an academic publishing context would be paid, they were under the false impression that popular magazines do not pay authors. Additionally, three out of five respondents falsely believed that they needed to submit a copyright application to receive copyright protection on their writing, but 4 out of 5 correctly identified that a license is an agreement that allows a particular use or distribution of a work.
In the post-survey, all four respondents correctly identified the difference between copyright and a license, and the two respondents who filled in the question about financial structures of different publishing types identified that some types of publications pay authors while others do not. Only two people responded to our question about how the pitch process works, and one of the two indicated that they did not know. Overall, respondents’ confidence levels about their abilities to find people in their networks, select a place to publish, negotiate a pitch or contract, and take concrete steps towards getting their work published increased.

Unfortunately the results from our second round of surveys are less interpretable because we received seven pre-workshop survey responses but only two post-survey responses. Both post-survey responses demonstrated an understanding of the material presented and neutral and positive confidence toward the competencies we asked about, but the survey response size is too small to extrapolate from.

Overall, our surveys returned small sample sizes, but the answers we did receive gave us a sense of what participants found useful about the workshops. While responses to individual questions checking understanding varied, respondents’ self-reported confidence increased across all questions. The open-ended feedback for us as the presenters were also especially useful to us in helping us understand which parts of the workshop were most

![FIGURE 1](image1.png)

**Pre-workshop survey response to “How confident do you feel in your ability to take concrete steps towards getting your work published?” from the November 2021 workshop**

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![FIGURE 2](image2.png)

**Post-workshop survey response to “How confident do you feel in your ability to take concrete steps towards getting your work published?” from the November 2021 workshop.**

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useful to attendees. Respondents found instruction about submissions processes at different types of publications and information about author contracts especially relevant.

Survey results aside, presenting the interactive Business of Publishing workshop allowed us to hear directly from students about their publishing concerns and goals. We learned that students who attended the workshop had a wide swath of publishing aspirations, including professional, academic, and personal writing. Some wanted to publish books, and some wanted to self-publish, which was not a type of publishing we had prepared to talk about. We found that it was impossible to anticipate what kind of publishing participants would be most interested in at any given workshop, so it was important to be flexible and ready to make recommendations for how to find more information through search and through mentors or others in their discipline or profession. For example, we ended up demonstrating how to create a Google search that would return conferences and calls for proposals for different professions and interests.

Our major takeaways from this project related to the process of designing the workshop itself, given the diverse nature of the target audience. The publishing world is extremely complex, and guidance about selecting and evaluating publishing venues, assessing the fairness of contracts and payment schedules, and best practices for promoting and self-archiving will vary widely based on whether the author is working with a journalistic or scholarly outlet, publishing a book or a blog post, and other factors. The workshop attendants differed not only in their interest in publication type but also in their academic discipline and career backgrounds. Previous publishing workshops were generally sought by individual schools or departments, generating commonalities among the audience in publishing goals and allowing didactic content to be tailored to their interests.

For this workshop, we needed to create a program with content that was flexible enough to mold to the needs of each audience. Without any guarantee that attendees would desire detailed information on the same topics, we chose not to develop lecture content but instead crafted a series of activities that would guide students through a variety of decision-making processes encountered in the publishing lifecycle.

This approach also aligned with the mission of the publishing programming writ large, which aimed to empower students to make informed choices about their own intellectual property and authorial presence. For example, rather than providing students with a specific list of publications, perhaps vetted for early career authors or reputation, we guided students to consider their own goals for publishing, and provided a list of benefits such as exposure to a particular audience, financial remuneration, or the ability to reuse their work as possible evaluative criteria.

We also learned that people from a variety of program types and in a variety of roles at the University were interested in the topics we presented about. We had faculty and librarians attend, and students from programs other than professional level programs attended and engaged in the material during the workshop. We noted that this model of workshop would work well for any audience with diverse needs by providing a flexible scaffold for future information gathering and decision making.

Although we haven’t offered a Business of Publishing workshop since March 2022 (almost a year ago as of this writing), the experience of designing, facilitating, and redesigning the workshop has impacted how we approach conversations about publishing in research consultations. We feel more confident helping students identify goals for their writing and make plans for how to move forward, even if we’re not familiar with the specifics of the type of publishing the student is interested in. The two liaison librarians with subject specialties on the team are able to be clear that they aren’t publishing experts, but also that they can help students identify submissions guidelines for the type of publication they’re interested in, tell them what to expect out of an author contract, and encourage them to negotiate for a fee if appropriate to the type of publishing they’re interested in. While this kind of consultation may seem beyond the scope of a liaison librarian’s responsibilities, including information about publishing in research consultations is in line with the ACRL Framework, which includes information as a creation process and scholarship as conversation as key frames for information literacy. Discussing publishing with professional-level Masters students helps them to understand information in its full context and to see themselves as contributors to the disciplinary and professional conversations they are being trained to take part in.

The development process also highlighted the benefits of collaboration within and across the libraries. In this case, the workshops would not have been nearly as well designed if we had not been able to combine subject
expertise with a deep knowledge of the audience. Likewise, having the subject expert participate in the live workshop rather than simply provide resources to the liaison librarians meant that more in-depth questions could be taken and the workshop could evolve organically based on the interests of the participants on each day.

Publishing and other areas of digital scholarship are often treated as technical rather than user-facing subject specialties. In order to support educational programs, staffing for digital scholarship and scholarly communications should be augmented to support both the development and administration of technical services and educational needs of college and research libraries. In its 2013 white paper Intersections of Scholarly Communication and Information Literacy, ACRL noted “All roles in an academic library are impacted and altered by the changing nature of scholarly communication and the evolution of the dissemination of knowledge.” The paper recognized the increasing need for new scholarly communications roles within the library as well as the role of liaison librarians and other specialists in teaching constituents, especially students about the evolving nature of publishing and the information lifecycle.

Broadly speaking, we would argue that colleges and universities should embed this type of instruction in professional graduate curricula, to level the playing field in an equitable way for students. To support academic staff, as well as students, our team would further argue that librarians and academic departments—at Columbia and beyond—would benefit from greater cross-collaboration to develop academic leaders’ shared understanding of the publishing process. To increase this type of collaboration, librarians—as well as Deans and faculty—may require resources for professional development and training (for example, with support from colleagues in Scholarly Communication or Digital Humanities) and additional digital scholarship staffing for teaching, providing technical services, and administering the publishing programs. With sufficient time and staffing, libraries and librarians could become leaders in this realm for colleges and universities.

While resources like the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy Sandbox continue to support librarians working outside of scholarly communications and publishing roles. In order to help librarians of all specialties to develop and ingrain publishing education, ACRL and other professional organizations can work to develop educational resources and programming to support all librarians in gaining fluency in the publishing lifecycle, new forms of scholarly production, impact measurement, and copyright. As the landscape continues to shift, the solicitation and promotion of lesson plans, teaching materials, and other portable resources as well as the production of events by leading organizations would help to inculcate knowledge and practice across the spectrum of academic librarians.

NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


