

Teaching the Teaching Librarian

Summary by Phillip Jones, Baylor University

Over 175 ALA conferees gathered at the Washington Hilton and Towers at 9:30 a.m. on June 28 to hear notable speakers address the importance of training library instructors for the information age. Attendees of the 1998 LIRT Program encountered several superlatives: three most engaging speakers, and one of Washington's most powerful air conditioners, which nearly caused an outbreak of frostbite.

The three speakers represented a broad spectrum of practice and geography: Cerise Oberman, dean of [Library and Information Services](#) at the [State University of New York at Plattsburgh](#), who also chairs the advisory group of the [National Information Literacy Institute](#); Lynn Westbrook, assistant professor, [School of Library and Information Studies, Texas Woman's University](#) (Denton); and Linnea Dudley, reference librarian, [Marygrove College](#) (Detroit), who also represents the PREMIER Project of the [Michigan Library Association](#).

Dr. Oberman began her presentation with several examples of pointed irony. As a dean responsible for selecting candidates for professional positions, she readily finds candidates with cutting-edge technological skills; however, securing ones with teaching ability is difficult. Furthermore, regional accrediting bodies are beginning to incorporate information literacy as an element in their assessment of campuses. Despite this increasing attention to the instructional mission of libraries, most library schools omit library instruction from their curricula: Oberman cited that in 1993 only ten library schools offered a credit course in instruction, down one from 1980. Hence, accrediting bodies are more progressive than library schools in articulating the role of the instruction librarian! Preparing librarians for prominent roles in information literacy remains a pressing need.

Founded in 1997, the National Information Literacy Institute (NILI) strives to address this need. NILI's official mission states that it is "dedicated to playing a leadership role in assisting individuals and institutions in integrating information literacy throughout the full spectrum of the educational process." Barely one year old, NILI has already outlined goals and planned programs. In 1999 NILI will host an immersion program for instruction librarians at SUNY Plattsburgh. Enrollment will be limited to eighty; later immersion programs will probably accept more participants. The [NILI web site](#) can provide additional information about NILI.

Oberman's response to a question at the end of her talk indicated her preference for a holistic library instruction program integrated across the curriculum, rather than one course for credit. However, she acknowledged that each campus is unique and that its politics may preclude her ideal. In such cases academic libraries best serve students with a required course promoting information literacy.

Professor Westbrook examined three questions in her presentation: What do library schools do to prepare teaching librarians? Why don't they do more? How can they be persuaded to do more? In response to her first question, she noted the practice at library schools in instruction. In addition,

she reported that in her own recent research she had found twenty-six library schools with classes in instruction. Nevertheless, the number is insufficient to meet the needs of future librarians.

Westbrook examined her second question historically. She argued that in the 1970s library schools gave two reasons for not teaching instruction: no one was able to teach the courses and no one would take the courses. As a rule, library school students who wished to take them were farmed out to schools of education. Today the latter reason is untenable: these courses are in high demand. However, library schools have difficulty offering instructional training precisely because of exponential demands on their curricula. As technology accelerates, libraries are becoming increasingly complex, and the faculties of library schools struggle to cover a broad array of material over a very short period of study. One solution that Westbrook offered has seen debate: extend the master's programs at all library schools to two years.

What to do? Westbrook discussed the influence that alumni have over their library schools. Librarians from a school with no instruction courses can lobby. Her next suggestion, to promote and support continuing education for instruction, mirrored Oberman and Dudley. In concluding, she reminded the audience that instruction librarians must continually hone their skills. Although library education can lay a strong foundation, professionals need support throughout their careers, a perfect segue to the third speaker.

PREMIER, a peer-based instructional program of the Michigan Library Association (MLA), was the subject of the presentation by the final speaker, Linnea Dudley. Ms. Dudley outlined the origin of the program, which the [Information Literacy Roundtable](#) of MLA developed in 1993 to address requests for in-service training from association members.

PREMIER focuses on institutional and individual growth, and has held workshops for participating institutions, which compile a comprehensive portfolio of their instructional programs. Compiling the portfolio enables librarians to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their libraries' instructional efforts. The portfolio serves as a blueprint on which to chart future ventures. Although peer-driven and volunteer-run, PREMIER encourages campus administrators to participate in both the preparation of portfolios and attendance at the workshops.

Since its genesis, PREMIER has gained enthusiastic support from libraries across Michigan. One of the three pilot institutions reported that library instruction had increased 60%; another added a full-time instruction position to its professional library staff. The attendance of a significant number of non-librarians at the workshops attest to the project's broad appeal. Despite its value, PREMIER faces challenges, especially a labor shortage. Ms. Dudley acknowledged that PREMIER hopes to develop a stronger presence on the Web, but the overwhelming success of the program has engaged volunteers elsewhere.

The 1998 LIRT Program concluded at noon. The slate of speakers challenged attendees to think critically about a timely topic, teaching the teaching librarian. The subject matter of the three speakers point toward a perennial challenge that instruction librarians face in the information age: how to train librarians to assume leadership roles in information literacy.