Librarians as Teachers: How Dewey Design Instruction?

By Jamie Dwyer

Instruction is a large part of most liaison roles. After multiple semesters of re-working slides and handouts, I worried that I was stuck in a rut. To overcome this, I completed the online course “Instructional Design Essentials” through ALA Editions and attended the LOEX Annual Conference which focused on library instruction and information literacy. These opportunities to discuss challenges and techniques with colleagues from a variety of institutions were invaluable.

The biggest takeaway from these experiences was that I was already using strategies from various instructional design models. Analyzing key factors such as audience (first year undergraduates or PhD students?), objectives (what do they need to know how to do?), environment (computer lab or lecture hall?), and context (specific assignment or general orientation?) is something most librarians already do while preparing for an instructional session. This is part of the first step of the popular ADDIE model, which includes Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, & Evaluation as steps in a cyclical process. Backward Design is another popular model emphasizing working backward from the outcomes you wish to achieve, to the assessment that will show these results, to the learning instruction/activities that will enable students to successfully complete the assessment tasks.

One-shot sessions remain a challenge for many librarians. Strategies I picked up from the course and LOEX include: allowing for “think time” after posing a question, targeting 2-3 objectives in a typical 50 minute time slot, and leaving more “gaps” for tangential but relevant discussion. As teaching continues to shift away from the idea of having a “sage on the stage” (lecturer) to “guide on the side” (facilitator), it is important for instructors to engage in self-reflection as part of the evaluation process. Active reflection during a one-shot can allow a flexible instructor to get the session back on track instead of speeding over a cliff and waiting for “next time” to make corrections.

One of my favorite LOEX sessions was presented by three former K-12 teachers who are now academic librarians. They discussed many strategies that carried over from students ages 5 to 20: it’s best to stand still while giving directions; presenting options to students allows them to feel more in control (i.e., “We’re covering these 2 databases today, which one do you want to start with?”); including a space for “Name” on handouts creates a stronger sense of accountability due to the perception that something with your name on it will get graded. I’ve added “Name” to some of my handouts and seem to notice more note-taking, although I haven’t formally tested this hypothesis.

Mindfulness while developing, implementing, and assessing instruction is the key to continued improvement. Most of these takeaways seem like common sense, but it’s good to hear them from colleagues. I am by no means an expert in instructional design now but the opportunity to take
part in these professional development activities has refreshed and re-energized my instruction.

Jamie Dwyer  
Visiting Assistant Professor and Information Services and Liaison Librarian  
Library of the Health Sciences-Chicago  
jamied@uic.edu