

Trial by Fire, Boot Camps and Brown Bags: How Do We Learn to Teach?

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Abstract

Remember teaching your first instruction class? What worked and what bombed? How much preparation time did it take you? What was the student's reaction? Did you get any help? Very often, librarians are required to teach with little or no formal training and this can cause a lot of anxiety and stress. In this paper, the author will share different continuing professional development (CPD) activities such as team teaching, boot camps and brown bags to help new librarians teaching instruction and information literacy classes. Should instruction librarians have teaching qualifications as our educator roles become more pronounced? What are some of the future skills for instruction librarians?

Keywords:

information literacy; academic libraries; professional development; teaching skills

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Introduction

“Whether librarians teach outside the library or not, we need to learn to teach. We should know about learning theories, including multiple intelligences, and how to construct a class so that we reach learners of all abilities... Too many of us focus on what we think is important and not on what students need. We cram too much information into 50- or 80-minute sessions and don't allow time for students to reflect and retain the information.” (Partello, 2005:115)

Recall teaching your first class? What was your experience like? Did you get any help? Where did you learn to teach? For many librarians teaching information literacy, their first class is often ‘trial by fire’ especially if it was not part of the library schools’ curriculum. There are different ways to acquire knowledge and skills and increasingly continuing professional development (CPD) activities have filled this gap as, locally in Singapore, instruction and information literacy is not offered in the library education curriculum. Majid (2004, p.58-9) noted that, “the purpose of continuing professional development (CPD) activities is to fill-in the knowledge gaps between formal education and the needs of the professional practice. Several methods, such as short courses, workshops, in-house training, computer-based instruction, distance education, professional talks, seminars, symposia, conferences, pre- and post-conference tutorials, etc., have been traditionally used for the development of professionals. Networking with colleagues, e-mail communications, and the Internet-based discussion groups are also considered important for this purpose.”

LaGuardia, Griego, Hopper and Melendez (1993) ask, so how do librarians teach? They describe the situation practically as being, ‘usually a trial by fire.’ Elaborating this further they noted that the process as being fast paced where the instruction librarian is required to package a class and ‘pack and go’ to deliver the instruction. Most times using ‘instinct’, and seizing the opportunity by setting aside the frills and the luxury of time to develop ‘perfect’ instructional designed programmes. But how long does it take? In the typical solo-act ‘trial by fire school’, probably years, but in today’s context it has become on-the-job (LaGuardia, Griego, Hopper, Melendez, 1993). With more new librarians being required to teach, it is not about nature or nurture but it has become a survival skill using techniques such as team teaching, coaching and mentoring including reversed mentoring. Gerrard and Knock (2004) noted that team teaching was a practical way to develop instructional skills and it helps to build confidence and camaraderie amongst the new and older librarians.

In this article, the author will share how Research Librarians and the Engagement Team Librarians at SMU Libraries as part of their CPD activities for knowledge sharing and confidence building, used boot camps and brown bag sessions. Post-activity feedback will be elaborated upon and weaved into paper.

Booting up the Boot Camp

Information Literacy (IL) or instruction at SMU Libraries is mostly one-shot sessions but is complemented by research consultations and intermittent Bite-sized workshops throughout the academic terms. These IL sessions are taught by a shared team of Research Librarians and Librarians who are part of the Engagement Team amongst their other responsibilities. The team comprise both experienced and new librarians. IL matters are included as an agenda item during the monthly Information Services (IS) meeting where mostly operational and administrative matters are discussed. With the limited time, there was a need to separately review the IL programmes being offered and to establish a platform for sharing best practices. Thus, the idea of a boot camp as a CPD activity was first mooted in July 2017.

Getting Strapped

The Heads, Learning and Information Services conceptualised and structured the boot camp. The IL boot camp was arranged with the purpose of re-aligning the library's information literacy programmes with SMU's strategic direction and to re-visit existing programmes and knowledge and practice exchange. It was scheduled for six weeks and the participants comprised both Research Librarians and the then First Year Experience or Engagement Team Librarians.

The structure of the programme was that every week, three librarians did a 15-minute microteaching on something that was new to them – a concept, tool, content, topic or teaching approach etc. Thus, they had to do some research and also think out of the box or be innovative and creative. As a pilot, we also wanted to evaluate the boot camp and the following learning evaluation and feedback approaches were used:

- At the end of every session, participants shared their 'Aha' moments and things that were still 'muddy' using post-its (formative reaction).
- A blog was set up where further insights were captured after the sessions <http://researchguides.smu.edu.sg/ILbootcamp2017> (reflection).
- Individual personal email feedback to each participant (coaching and mentoring).
- At the final session, feedback was elicited on key learning take-aways (summative reactions).

Tightening the Boot camp with Feedback

The team members put in a lot of effort and were creative and innovative in their respective microteaching lessons forming a knowledge bank of easy to implement ideas. As part of the evaluation of the programme an anonymous survey we created asking participants questions that ranged from what resonated with them, to what they liked or disliked and possible applications in their IL programmes. Figures 1 and 2 below provide some of the responses received.



Figure 1. What resonated well with you?

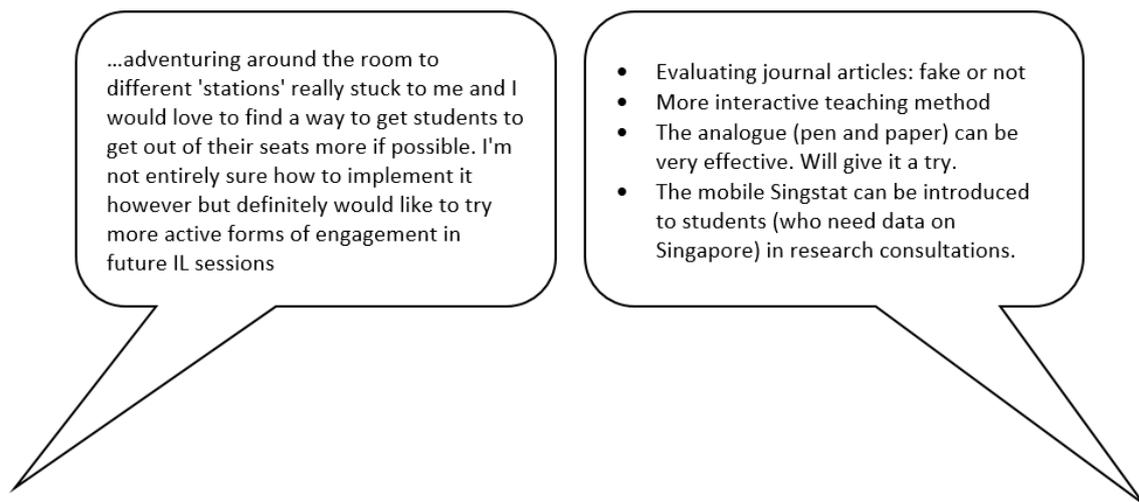


Figure 2. What can you apply in your IL?

In general, most participants enjoyed the boot camp concept highlighting that despite the amount of time taken to prepare and stress, they learnt a lot through the different sharing as noted by one participant, *“Speaking as a new librarian, yes I think it worked very well. I really enjoyed people's presentations and it allowed me to observe my peers in a teaching environment.”* Supporting the CPD IL literature on creating a ‘safe environment’, a participant succinctly remarked, *“The boot camp itself was interesting, with lots of learning points. However, the safe environment, in which everyone was able to share, is also an important takeaway for such professional development programme”.*

Like all programmes, there were areas for improvement such as the timing, structure and scope where they requested for short abstracts before the session, having a list of topics to choose from, freedom to include tools, best practices, frameworks, standards and lastly, have a more thematic boot camp to focus on new technology, teaching styles, subjects, etc.

The participants also provided feedback on other IL competencies they wanted to develop further. Figure 3 is a word cloud on the areas for training:



Figure 3. IL competencies: Is there any area that requires further sharpening?

After sharing the feedback with the library’s leadership and the IL team and coupled with some informal comments about the boot camp concept and experiences listed above, it was

decided to go back to the drawing board and look for another approach that was not very intensive but at the same time impactful.

Brown Bag Initiative: Plastic, Paper or Recyclable?

SMU's Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) runs a series of brown bag sessions where Faculty share their best practices in teaching and hence the idea of holding similar sessions bore fruit after some brainstorming with a colleague. It was decided that it should be a 'bottom up' rather than a 'top down' approach to co-create the sessions with the team. To this end, a short simple survey was administered to determine what their motivation to learn and participate in the session were. There were 12 respondents to the survey. In the analysis of the results, the team wanted it to be light, have active participation and practical tips as can be seen from this comment: "*Sessions which are easy-going, light-hearted; nothing too forced, or pressured a situation where participants are expected to contribute. There are plenty of this stuff in YouTube and Ted on inspirational teaching. We could view those and reflect on own and share them willingly just to spark a discussion.*"

Another participant said, "*I think what would encourage me to attend if the atmosphere is light and informal. I don't want to feel like I am going in for another meeting or work-type discussion or being "coerce" to attend something that I really don't want to. I mean, it should be sessions where people feel like they want to be there rather than they are obliged to be there. I don't know how you can make it free like it's not "really work" related when it really is*".

These are poignant comments as very often one attends CPD activities without any learner motivation or 'voice' as noted in this comment, "*moderated discussion/ideas exchange among colleagues, where everyone has a chance to voice out their ideas and contribute meaningfully in the conversation.*"

What went into the Brown Bag?

Another question related to the types of activities that would be appealing to the team and make the session more meaningful. The top eight comments listed below clearly indicated they wanted more discussions and sharing of tips rather than practising teaching techniques, which formed part of the boot camp. The top eight activities were:

1. End of semester discussion of what worked and what didn't - and ideas to implement in the future (83.33%)
2. Sharing of tips and techniques (83.33%)
3. Informal discussions (75%)
4. Reading articles (journals, chapters, blogs, etc.), followed by discussions (75%)
5. Sharing of documents, lesson plans, presentation materials, etc. (66.67%)
6. Invited speakers (58.33%)
7. Watching videos, followed by discussions (50%)
8. Forum for practicing teaching techniques (25%)

In consultation with some colleagues the sharing session format was chosen. A personalised email reminder was sent to the team giving them a 'heads up' on what to prepare:

Hi All

Further our IS meeting, for our first BB session, we will reflect on our IL sessions in T1 and share in 3 mins something you did in your classes.

It can be sharing an activity sheet, an ice breaking activity or a classroom management technique that worked for you. Or even an IL article you read!

Please let me know if you have further clarifications.

On the day itself, a brown bag was provided filled with a fruit and breakfast bar! The curiosity of the team members helped break the ice and set the mood for the next hour-and-a-half, which was moderated by myself. Team members (TM) shared their stories and they received personalised feedback (PF). Below are some of the narratives:

TM1: Shared about involving students to create search strings when using Boolean. She got a student to write their search string and had a discussion around it.

PF: *Classroom management in this instance is important, as there is a need to involve other students when one student is presenting. Giving clear instructions to students before the activity also will help, i.e. they will be required to share with the rest of the class.*

TM2: Shared about how she used Kahoot! to engage learners and create a competitive gamified environment. Students were asked to explore the Research Guide and then answer the questions using Kahoot!

PF: *Engaging Gen Y through the use of mobile learning helps build digital literacy skills. Having them explore the Research Guide is discovery learning.*

TM3: Taught a session with the Wellness Centre on stress and helped with sharing content and resources such as videos.

PF: *There are collaborations but being actively involved in the collaboration is important. What role does one play? E.g. when sitting in class session, are we active or passive?*

TM4: She jazzed up otherwise dry content for her PhD students by using Zeeings, which students accessed using their mobile phones and responded collectively after small group discussions. It was used to grab their attention.

PF: *Getting students to give a collective response is a way to observe group think. It is a good opportunity to walk around the classroom and pick on the discussions. Technology Enabled Learning (TEL) tools must always be tried and tested beforehand.*

TM5: Shared her first in class interaction where she did a skit with another colleague. Through question and answer, they addressed students concerns or myths. The students did laugh!

PF: *Role-playing is a good example of sending messages in an indirect way. There may be some students who would not like to be vocal but they can get some answers to unexpressed questions.*

Sustainable Brown Bags

Reflecting on both the boot camp and brown bag sessions, they had their strengths and weaknesses in terms of approach and scope. The former requiring a lot more effort in terms of preparation and as a pilot, some found the scope limiting. Furthermore, microteaching can be stressful especially in front of colleagues especially the inexperienced ones. The brown bag session provided a 'safe environment' where the activity was open-ended and the duration was much shorter. Embedded in the stories were many of the competencies the team wanted developed from the boot camp survey as seen earlier in Figure 3. This highlighted the need for more team teaching and observations. Separating the experienced and inexperienced librarians would be something to 'do-differently' the next time. The candour of the team

members through the anonymous survey and planning the brown bag session with another colleague is a 'do-again' for the next one.

Parting Thoughts

Information Literacy (IL) and Instruction has become our *raison d'etre* to demonstrate the library's value and impact on the overall success of students and the institution. As educators, many librarians do not have any formal teaching qualification. Job descriptions today require skills such as pedagogy, instructional design and a knowledge of technological-enhanced teaching and learning tools. Where do we learn this? What are our choices? On-the-job training has become a stopgap measure. Is it about time that stakeholders advocate to reintroduce a refreshed information literacy and instruction curriculum in the library education programme in Singapore? Alternatively, should instruction librarians supplement their MLIS by obtaining a teaching qualification especially in this day of upskilling creating a bi-profession and career path option? Majid (2004: 69) in making a case for CPD activities by LIS schools noted "a close coordination between LIS schools, professional associations, national libraries, funding agencies, and library and information employers is essential for the systematic identification of the required competencies, type of CPD programs needed, and the mechanisms for sharing responsibilities". Perhaps the time is ripe to have a boot camp with the key stakeholders and put brown bags on the table to start the conversation.

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