

The Embedded Librarian(s) at the National University of Singapore: The Journey Continues

*Wong Kah Wei and Magdeline Ng Tao Tao
National University of Singapore Libraries
Singapore*

Abstract

This paper aims to share the current state of embedded librarianship at National University of Singapore (NUS). The embedded librarian initiative started since 2016 at NUS with surprising positive outcomes and movements. The first embedded librarian was offered a joint appointment with Ridge View Residential College (RVRC) and holds the position of Fellow. Her teaching portfolio has also expanded to include two micro-modules to teach Year Two students reading, questioning and searching skills. In addition to the first embedded librarian at RVRC detailed in this article, one more embedded librarian was introduced in 2018. A Science Resource Librarian was appointed as the Adjunct Instructor at NUS ALSET (Institute for Application of Learning Science and Educational Technology) Education Unit. Being an Adjunct Instructor, the librarian team-teaches two modules which includes inquiry and evaluation skills.

This article delineates the story of the embedded librarian at ALSET as well as details of the new micro-modules of the RVRC embedded librarian.

Keywords:

Embedded librarianship; Information Literacy; Faculty-Librarian Collaboration; Academic Libraries

Background to the RVRC embedded librarian

The term “embedded librarian” is defined as a librarian who is focused “on the needs of one or more specific groups, building relationships with these groups, developing a deep understanding of their work, and providing information services that are highly customized and targeted to their greatest needs” (Shumaker & Talley, 2009).

The breakthrough in embedding the librarian in a faculty came in 2014 after many years of one-shot instructional information literacy programmes and NUS Libraries’ endeavors in collaborating with faculty. The embedded librarian in Ridge View Residential College (RVRC) is an Academic Advisor who teaches both information literacy skills as well as the subject of environmental sustainability in the module “Understanding and Critiquing Sustainability”. As one of the Academic Advisors in a team of seven, the embedded librarian develops the information literacy component of the module and also integrates information literacy into the module’s syllabus.

One of the objectives of the module “Understanding and Critiquing Sustainability” is to equip students with the ability to think critically and to question. To support this objective, the embedded librarian weaves information literacy skills such as questioning, searching and the evaluating information, into the module’s syllabus. With these skills so deeply embedded, these information literacy skills are “tools” in the module’s toolkit and are taught by all the module’s Academic Advisors.

To teach questioning, the embedded librarian introduces the PESTLE Analysis as a framework of enquiry. In tutorials, students use this framework to enquire and investigate a sustainability issue from multiple perspectives by considering Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental factors.

The embedded librarian teaches, facilitates and assesses a class of 15 first year students every semester.

The journey of the RVRC embedded librarian since 2016

In August 2017, the embedded librarian was offered a joint appointment with RVRC. The joint appointment requires the embedded librarian to fulfill a total of 50 hours of class time per semester along with other academic duties. With this joint appointment, the embedded librarian holds the position of Fellow at RVRC (<http://rvrc.nus.edu.sg/rvrc-family/fellows/>).

2017 was also the year RVRC proposed a range of Year Two Forums. This is a continuation of the Year One curriculum which aims “to build on the experience of the first year, to cultivate students’ holistic development in terms of intellectual inquiry, inner resilience, social, personal and interpersonal competence, as well as confidence and agility for workplace readiness”. The Year Two curriculum is centred around the three interconnected themes of Respect, Reflection and Resilience (<http://rvrc.nus.edu.sg/rvrc-programme/rvrc-year-two-forums/>). Students are required to take two Forums from either theme in order to fulfill requirements of residency at the college. The Forums were non-modular learning options with emphasis on experiential learning and outdoor experiences and taught over 12 hours. Class size was limited to about 15 students.

When the proposal of the Forums was first discussed, the embedded librarian saw the opportunity to address two specific areas which she has been endeavoring to explore. These were:

- Getting students to be interested in reading through questioning and searching for answers.
- Advancing information literacy skills through practice.

In getting students to read, the embedded librarian addressed a specific need expressed repeatedly by the Master of RVRC in many conversations he had with the embedded librarian. The Master had lamented at the quality of students' ideas in their projects. The Master attributed this to students not reading widely or deeply. The embedded librarian considered the Year Two Forum as an ideal platform to explore pairing questioning and reading skills. This builds on the foundation of information literacy skills students had learnt in Year One. As students learnt to question using 5W 1H and PESTLE Analysis in Year One, why not build on this foundation of enquiry by adding critical reading skills? Yet, the embedded librarian did not consider the ability to read critically as the ultimate goal. By practicing questioning and reading critically, the embedded librarian hoped students would develop an interest and a habit of reading and enquiry which will, then, ultimately lead to the development of healthy skepticism and discernment of what they read.

With these in mind, the embedded librarian proposed two Year Two Forums – both enquiry-based and centred on questioning and searching for information. The first Forum which was conducted in Sep 2018 was “Reading Critically: Questioning What You Read”. “Reading Critically: Questioning What You Read” was conducted in two-hour sessions over six weeks. A total of 23 students attended the Forum.

In the Reading Forum, students learnt how to critically read print news by questioning the text to

delve deeper into the subject. Students learnt how to:

- Identify keywords to comprehend the text
- Question the text by applying 5W 1H and PESTLE Analysis
- Question the context of the text

Students read and compared articles from news sources such as Straits Times, South China Morning Post, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Financial Times and so on. Students also learnt about the business of news and the biases of different news sources. In questioning what they read, students were prompted to think of the purpose of questioning to discover and not to criticize, the impacts different views on others and to reflect on how their own views and values influence their questioning and their judgements.

The second Forum “Great Ideas: Start Exploring with Secondary Research!” which started in January 2019. This second Forum focuses on how students could determine if their idea is novel, sustainable, feasible or usable by investigating its potential using existing literature or research. Students learn how to:

- Question the idea
- Search for existing research
- Evaluate the information they found
- Cite the information they use

Apart from teaching these two new Year Two Forums and the GEQ1917 module, the RVRC embedded librarian was also involved in academic events or activities at RVRC. One such

activity is the RVRC student admissions in which the embedded librarian interviews students applying to live at RVRC.

After all these years of supporting RVRC, the RVRC embedded librarian continues to share her experiences as an academic to NUS colleagues, NUS senior management and visiting librarians. She hopes to encourage the NUS community to consider the librarian as an academic and an equal partner in teaching and learning.

The embedded librarian in ALSET

In 2018, a second embedded librarian was introduced in NUS. A Science librarian was offered an adjunct faculty appointment with ALSET (The Institute for Application of Learning Sciences and Educational Technology) Education Unit, holding the appointment of Adjunct Instructor (<http://www.nus.edu.sg/alset/education.html>). This appointment requires the embedded librarian to team-teach with other academics which includes developing and updating syllabus, teaching and facilitating and assessing students' assignments. As an embedded librarian, she teaches two modules "Learning to Learn Better (ALS1010)" and "Learning to Choose Better (ALS1020)".

ALSET modules

The module "Learning to Learn Better (ALS1010)" is a pioneering course on learning sciences in Singapore. Created by ALSET, ALS1010 provides students with the skills to be effective lifelong learners. It cultivates curiosity by inculcating habits and strategies to make learning more exciting and effective. This undergraduate course examines recent research and longstanding wisdom from the field of learning science. Learners will critically assess their own learning strategies, evaluate proposed learning techniques, and formulate their individual learning strategies to help them learn more effectively.

The module started in AY2017/2018 Semester 1 and was offered to students in Faculty of Science as a pilot programme. In AY2017/2018 Semester 2 onwards, this module was officially offered to all undergraduate students in NUS. In AY2018/2019 Semester 1, a new module "Learning to Choose Better (ALS1020)" was developed.

The journey

The Science librarian's journey started in 2017 when the Director of ALSET approached the Science Library for a venue to teach the module "Learning to Learn Better (ALS1010)". At that point, the Science Library was designed to provide more discussion areas for the students. The Science Library then decided to re-purpose existing discussion areas as teaching spaces to support ALSET in their teaching. The Science librarian took the opportunity to request to sit in some of the classes.

After observing and learning more about the module, the Science librarian recommended some improvements to student learning. One of the lecturers of the module who was also the Assistant Director of Education in ALSET recognized the value of the librarian's skills and expertise in teaching inquiry and critical thinking skills. The Director of ALSET also found her contributions refreshing and was impressed by the multidisciplinary perspectives she could contribute to the module. The Science librarian co-teaches to implement some of her ideas to engage students and to help them learn better. Subsequently, she became an active member of the teaching team as well as played a role of developing stronger relationships with the faculty and students.

Her contributions in ALSET expanded and included co-teaching in another module “Learning to Choose Better (ALS1020)”. Along with a team of lecturers in AY2017/2018, the embedded librarian taught a cohort of 100 students in ALS1010 and 80 students in ALS1020. In total, the embedded librarian spent approximately 36 hours per semester teaching and facilitating.

Some of the challenges the ALSET embedded librarian faced were:

- To learn a non-Science subject in a short span of time
- To team teach the session with two other instructors
- To facilitate large classes in an active learning setting

To overcome these challenges, the Science librarian employed the techniques learnt from the module to manage how information could be processed and delivered. In addition, with her prior experience in teaching, the Science librarian managed to step out of the comfort zone and pick up the content quickly. These experiences in ALSET allowed her to gain more insights into metacognition and various learning strategies, which catalyzed her abilities in creating a more optimal learning environment for herself and her students.

Lessons learnt from the embedded librarian initiative

In “one-shot” information literacy programs which are typically conducted to support faculty modules, the librarian is considered a guest speaker invited to supplement a lecture or to create awareness of the usefulness of information literacy skills. Without the time to apply what they learn, students considered information literacy skills as helpful in completing the module’s assignment but not as a relevant skill in cultivating a discerning, well-informed professional ready for the workplace.

The embedded librarian initiative did not immediately cultivate students to be professionals for the workplace but rather created a role for the librarian to be educators and academics. The positions given to the embedded librarians in their respective units and college, provided the librarians the opportunities to weave information literacy skills into the syllabus. Information literacy skills are no longer supplementary to learning. The embedded librarians have made information literacy skills what students need to learn. Information literacy skills are considered skills required to inquire, to question, to investigate, to explore, to discern and to be a critical thinker.

Since 2014, when NUS Libraries started the information literacy program at Ridge View Residential College, the embedded librarians’ roles as educators evolved from that of contributor to an innovator exploring new ground. Both the ALSET and RVRC librarians were given the opportunity to develop and teach ALSET’s new module and RVRC’s new Year Two Forums respectively. These were rare and valuable opportunities to pursue the teaching of information literacy skills which faculty modules could not provide.

The continued support of ALSET and RVRC and the opportunities offered would not materialized if not for the champions and advocates of information literacy. Like the Master of RVRC, the Director and Assistant Director of ALSET upheld their support and the value of information literacy skills in equipping students for the 21st century.

Getting the proverbial foot in the door for both ALSET and RVRC embedded librarians were simply being the space where the lecturers and students were. Both librarians went into the classroom, observed student learning and started conversations on student learning. Both librarians were genuinely curious about how students learn. Both immersed themselves in student learning and faculty teaching when they started conversations with lecturers. These conversations were about how to help students to learn better. The librarians’ ideas were not

necessarily about the relevance of information literacy skills. Their ideas and suggestions addressed challenges students faced in finding ideas for their projects, framing their ideas so that students could complete projects on time and so on. However, it is essential to note that the lecturers were already supporters of information literacy skills. The librarians did not have to convince them. Their conversations and interactions were based on the premise that students will indeed benefit from learning information literacy skills.

Certainly, it was essential that the lecturers were open to new ideas, intent in improving student learning and above all, considered librarians as peers and experts. In order to engage the lecturers in fruitful discussions, the embedded librarians had to ascertain how they could align their goals with those of the lecturers' and demonstrate their ability to adapt their teaching objectives and pedagogies to enhance student learning. The embedded librarians immersed themselves in the academic culture, thinking, speaking and working like academics but yet without compromising their ideals as librarians.

Conclusion

The embedded librarians of both RVRC and ALSET dedicate a substantial part of their time in working closely with their academic colleagues to develop teaching resources and materials as well as teaching, facilitating and assessing. Through embedded librarianship, librarians move from a supporting role into partners, educators, mentors and coaches (Carlson & Kneale, 2011).

A question always asked is whether dedicating a librarian to a single faculty or teaching department is worth the investment. The time each embedded librarian allocates to planning and developing resources and preparing to teach far exceeds the class contact hours. What do libraries look for in these returns in investment? How are the outcomes of student learning and faculty collaboration quantified? The embedded librarians would say that the most essential outcome is to see their students learn and continue to apply what they have learnt in the years to come. Like all educators, the embedded librarians would like their students to serve and to contribute to the betterment of society and people. After all, embedded librarians are academics and librarians aspiring to make a difference in the lives of their students.

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