BECOMING AN EMBEDDED LIBRARIAN

Making Connections in the Classroom

MICHELLE REALE

MICHELLE REALE is an associate professor at Arcadia University at Glenside, Pennsylvania, where she is a fully embedded librarian. She divides her time between the United States and Sicily, where she does ethnography among African refugees. She blogs on immigration, migration, and social justice in the Sicilian context at www.sempresicilia.wordpress.com.

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DR. SANDRA CRENSHAW

Foreword

A View from the Lectern

I WASN'T QUITE SURE HOW TO REACT THE DAY THAT I FOUND OUT that there would be a librarian embedded in my senior seminar class the following semester. Should I be excited that there would be another academic voice to help guide the students in their research for their senior projects? Should I wonder if the addition to my class was an indication of the department's concern for my teaching? Would this be an added burden on my students? On me? Or worse yet, would it mean that everything—from syllabus to grading—would need to shift away from my comfort zone of control? I had heard of attempts to embed librarians in sections of the same course in previous semesters, and I knew that it had been tough going. It was clear that the faculty member didn't really know what to do with the librarian attending their class every week, and that the librarian was struggling to be an effective resource for the students because of this lingering question mark which everyone felt every day.

My first decision in the process was to not be *that* professor. That I would make this work . . . confident in my students' abilities to adapt to and appreciate the role of the librarian in our classroom, and confident in my own desire to learn from the experience and from my colleague. I knew it would mean taking on some new pedagogies and letting some go, being flexible in the

classroom to a certain degree, and being hyper-aware of what a librarian can and should change in a classroom to make it better.

With trusty pen and paper, I met for the first time with Michelle about my section of the senior seminar class. We sat in her office talking. Five minutes turned to fifteen, which turned to thirty, which turned into ninety. We talked about the dynamics of classes with embedded librarians, how relationships between teacher and students are made more dynamic and complex than in traditional classrooms, and about how her voice might enhance the experience and assignments for the class. I'm happy to say that this was one of many meetings which we had in the following months, and I'm also happy to say that with every meeting, I grew more and more excited about the potentials.

We planned research assignments and discussed expectations. We talked about what would be ideal shifts and changes in the student experience and how this would enrich their writing. We even talked about how the students' relationships with me and with each other would develop into more complex, fulfilling dynamics in the classroom.

Then the day of reckoning came. *The first day of class.*

As we marched through all of those things you do on the first day, I introduced Michelle to the class as our "embedded librarian"—the authority on all things research-related, a source of support and solutions for their research struggles (which they always have, though many students won't admit it), and a dedicated sounding board for their projects. Michelle stood, and as I looked out at the faces of the students as she talked about her purpose and role, I saw a mixture of excitement, relief, shrugging apathy, and confusion (and maybe even fear?).

In that moment, it struck me. The students were imagining the same questions that I had when I first heard of Michelle's role in my class. I was looking in a mirror reflecting months ago, before I understood the role of embedded librarians in the classroom. Without expecting it, I had just drawn a bit closer to my students in that shared moment.

The consistent objective of every good professor in each course they teach is rather basic: to provide the students with the most effective learning environment for the course content, including considerations of pedagogies, materials, venues, and supports. Educational researchers have explored ways to accomplish this for decades, focusing on student-teacher relationships, co-curricular resources for struggling students, and even the effective placement of the trash can in the classroom setting. What many educational researchers sidestep, perhaps because it is difficult to quantify and harder to assess, is the nature of social connections in a college classroom and how they affect learning.

The traditional college classroom acknowledges only one major "social" connection, the relationship between the teacher and the students. Work is

set forth by the faculty to create the faculty-produced objectives. Students work and achieve the objectives with primary guidance by the faculty and the course materials, even if students are encouraged to work together to solve a problem. The students' process and product, in the end, are foundationally based in the student-teacher relationship.

But such a simplistic social structure is fragile. If trust, enthusiasm, clarity, and communication are maintained between the teacher and students, the class runs smoothly. If any one of these characteristics fails, the relationship breaks down and the teacher becomes an outsider to the bonds already deeply forged between students. The permutations of such an exile in the classroom are many, and are difficult to recover from. Even in Freirian, decentered classrooms, the students' and teacher's trust and communication must withstand the stresses of the students' self-directed learning in order for it to be successful, thereby maintaining the structure of the student-teacher relationship while shifting its emphasis.

Social researchers who study complex networks suggest that a "community" is an organizational relationship structure which connects smaller, complexly connected groups (nodes) to each other through shared goals, objectives, experiences, and outcomes. In a college classroom, the students represent one node, while the teacher represents another. But what happens when a librarian resides in the classroom as well?

What happens is amazing. The shared struggles of the students, teacher, and librarian in establishing the new matrix of roles (nodes) and relationships in the classroom evolve into a more complex, stronger community, with more links among students (for their parallel experiences with the librarian), stronger links between students and teacher (for their shared experience with the new perspectives which the librarian brings to the objectives and content of the course), and ultimately, a richer classroom community which encourages student confidence and deeper thinking about skills and content.

This is not to say, however, that the new classroom community structure doesn't have its challenges. One of the greatest struggles for the faculty member is the self-reflective practice that must underpin the new, more dynamic classroom community structure. Where before the faculty might reflect generally about how the class went on a given day, the necessary discussion with the librarian before and after the class session lays bare the faculty's strengths and weaknesses, whether they are pervasive or just how this class turned out on that particular day. This discussion pokes at the edges of both the content and pedagogy, the construction and the relationships of the course. And that is a hard thing to explore for some, even for those who welcome the librarian into their classes. In effect, it means self-reflection, which is the first—and most uncomfortable—step in effective self-assessment (of both pedagogy and student learning).

And it's not an easy place for the embedded librarian to be, serving as the translator/negotiator between faculty and students, as well as a kind of translator/negotiator between what the faculty thinks they're doing pedagogically and what's actually happening in the classroom. But once communication and trust are established between faculty and librarian (and all the nodes of the community are clearly linked to each other through that communication and trust), the community of the class can stand on firmer ground.

So in the end, where does this leave us? Where did it leave my class, the students, me, and our embedded librarian?

On the last day of class, it left us with applause. But the fascinating thing was that the students weren't just applauding because they were done and had a well-deserved break looming in front of them. They applauded for themselves for tackling the content theory that had terrified nearly all of them at the start of the semester. They applauded me for helping them reach their goals. But most significantly, they applauded Michelle for being the solution to their frustration (both with their research and with my presentation of the content), for being the encouraging and guiding voice when they lost their way in the process, and for being what they always wanted (but never knew they wanted) . . . a mentor who helped them negotiate the content and process of their research and who was something different than the traditional, all-powerful, grade-bestowing faculty member.

That day, I also joined in the applause because I had found someone to challenge my stale ideas and uphold my good ones. I'd found a partner in the classroom community who bound us together in ways that helped me reach my goal of providing the students the most effective learning environment we could.

And I, for one, can't wait to do this again.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

*If you want something new, you have
to stop doing something old.*

—Peter F. Drucker

S O MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN IN RECENT YEARS ON THE CRISIS
of the identity of the librarian, the demise of the book (and therefore,
the library), as well as other dire predictions. One often feels as though it is
demanded of us information professionals to continually reinvent ourselves,
which is not necessarily a bad thing. We work in a profession that has been
historically misunderstood in just about every way conceivable. I have encoun-
tered my share of people who did not even know that a librarian needed a
master's degree! I have also encountered the assertion "my grandmother was
a librarian!" a few times.

Times change and professional practice changes with it. In academia,
librarians now, more than ever, are often seen as collaborative partners in
the education process, more so with the advent of designing, promoting, and
enacting information literacy. Librarians are now more active on campuses,
largely having shed our "auxiliary" role to faculty (but still recognizing and
fulfilling our role as research support) as we partake in committees, campus
governance, social events, and engaging in and presenting our own research.
This has helped faculty to see us as "partners" and "colleagues," and has shown
us to be active, involved, and engaged members of the campus community
with a common goal: the support and education of our *students*.

This change in our involvement is not mere cosmetics; it is real transformation. I have seen this in my own university library where just a mere ten years ago it would have been unheard of for me and my colleagues to be doing half of the things we are doing now (teaching, proposing classes, being elevated to professor status, etc.) simply because we were not seen as being capable or deserving of a seat at the table. Not true, of course, but perception is everything. With a new library director at the helm eight years ago, she had a plan that would elevate each and every one of us to faculty status. But she said it would take a while to get there: we should do our work and do it well. We began calling ourselves "faculty librarians," which at first confused and confounded faculty. "No matter," our director said. "Continue. It will make a difference." And she, in her proven infinite wisdom, was correct.

Over the years we entered into territory including but also beyond the reference desk that none of us could have imagined for ourselves. We worked slow and steady, but we took chances and became innovative with our practices. We promoted both ourselves and the library. We expressed discontent with the old way of doing things, but we did so in a constructive way: we proposed alternative ways of doing things. We tried different reference models, eschewing the "sit and wait" model of reference. We reasoned that how could someone respect a reference librarian who simply sat, just waiting all day for a question? We were on our way to being full faculty and wanted to be seen as such.

It was in this climate of great change and questioning that I began to feel a deep dissatisfaction with one-shot instruction, students who remained clueless after instruction, professors who dictated to me what to teach, when, and for how long, despite the fact that the subject I was teaching was my own specialty! As well, I lamented the lack of continuity with students. For sure, they could make an appointment with me if they needed to, but few did—so neither they nor I had the benefit of continuity. Since I was (and still am) the English department liaison, I decided to test the waters a bit with the courses required for the English major, in addition to Senior Thesis class.

One of the frustrations of doing bibliographic sessions in various classes is that the students are often not connecting, not absorbing what you are trying to teach them. As well, library and research "skills" are not highly prized—mainly, because skills are often seen as the opposite of what is considered academic. Forget the fact that in most places (my institution being one of them) we do not have a credited course on library skills implemented in the curriculum, nor do we otherwise grade or hold students accountable for what we have taught them. We rely heavily on faculty to reinforce the skills we have taught, but the truth is, that in many cases, professors are not well versed in the skills themselves and often have no particular interest in learning them.

The first year I was frustrated at every attempt to be a vital presence in the class. The professor, now retired, who taught thesis was reluctant to

allow me to attend or participate in any more than two classes a semester, and was even resentful of that. He told me that his students knew what they were doing. I assured him that what we saw at the reference desk was in direct opposition to that. He took offense. He sighed heavily, telling me that he did not want to change a thing—he'd had a formula for this long and it seemed to work. Only, it didn't. So for the next two years, I worked trying to make inroads into other English classes, and while my "help" was always appreciated, I was hardly seen as integral to the students' learning. I even noted several times when I was clearly used as a "babysitter" of sorts—I would be asked to go to a class to do a "session" only to find out that the professor would not be in attendance. Those were difficult classes. Because I had been given no authority whatsoever, the students' attendance and attention span were poor. It was causing me to rethink my career. As clichéd as it sounds, I felt like Sisyphus, continually rolling that boulder up the mountain only to have it roll down again.

I had some of what I will call "tacit" knowing, some instincts about how I wanted my interactions and my teaching to go with students. I had a sense of what I could accomplish with them if I would only be given the chance. It was not until the professor who rebuffed my attempts to integrate information literacy into his class retired and two new professors were assigned to teach the Senior Thesis class that I jumped in with both feet.

I had just started reading about embedded librarianship and was incredibly intrigued (and excited) by the possibilities. I had read the positive and the negative, but the negatives, mostly the argument that librarians are librarians—not professors—did not dissuade me at all. In fact, I disagreed with the argument wholeheartedly—if librarians are not educators, then what are we?

I put together a proposal but not too thought out, because I felt that if the two professors were amenable to the idea, I would like the classes to be a collaborative effort. Friends of mine, professors and librarians alike, were skeptical of my approach, and felt that I was trying to stake out territory that was not mine for the taking. Misunderstood again. In fact, that could not have been further from the truth. What is true is that professors may feel threatened or territorial. That is only natural, most especially given the fact that fundamentally, a librarian's mandate is often (but thankfully not always) a totally mystery to faculty.

If necessity is the mother of invention, I felt the imperative to try something different. I have been embedded for a few years now in the Senior English Thesis course, two sections each fall semester. There have been pitfalls and missteps, for sure. All in all, it has been a process. Sometimes a maddening one, but often also transformational—for me and for my students.

When I tell people that I am an "embedded" librarian or that I have been "embedded" in classes within my liaison discipline, the reaction is usually one of confusion—from non-librarians and academics as well: "You're what? I'm

sorry, can you explain that?" You know the old response to a joke that falls flat: *I guess you had to be there*. Well, that is how I came to being embedded in classes. As a librarian who began doing one-shot instruction and who felt early on and clearly that it did not work, neither for me nor for my students, I realized that I needed to know what they didn't know and I needed to know what they knew. In a very real and not figurative way, *I had to be there*. I realized that I had to be in class with the students, I had to hear what they were hearing and I had to be able to engage with them there in order to be of any help to them at all.

The incarnations of embedded librarianship are many. The research is chock-full of so many different ways of embedding, though mainly concentrated on classroom and distance services. I would posit that librarians should not limit themselves to what may seem currently proscribed, but instead individualize the effort based on the amount of time you can reasonably invest, the department or class you wish to embed in or with, your relationship or buy-in with a particular faculty member, the subject matter, and so on. I truly believe that a one-size-fits-all model of embedding does not take into account all of the many factors that go into embedding and which I will go into in further detail in another chapter; namely, the role that most students and faculty members see librarians in (and usually that does not include the classroom) and our relationship with faculty who often, paradoxically, do not see us as "academic," though "skilled."

I offer this book as encouragement to begin the process. It is my hope that it is both theoretical and practical. As for me and my practice, I am primarily interested in actual classroom embedding and believe it to be true embedding, and so this book is dedicated to that *specific* practice. Other extremely well-written and informative books have covered virtual embedded librarianship and have done so well, but this book will remain, happily, in classroom territory.

It is my desire to provide a rationale, a way to get started, and to provide inspiration for an aspect of librarianship that is not only extremely satisfying, but also has the potential for making a huge difference. I hope this book can be a guide and a support to all librarians embarking on embedded practice.

RESOURCE

Drews, Kathy, and Nadine Hoffman. "Academic Embedded Librarianship: An Introduction." *Public Services Quarterly* 6 (2010): 75–82.

1
From the Beginning

Traditional Librarianship Takes a Different Path

*Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,
through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human
beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.*

—Paulo Freire

TRADITION IN THE FIELD OF LIBRARIANSHIP HAS A STRONG hold in the collective consciousness. While most people not in the field could not give you specifics about what that tradition is as it relates to the field itself, they will be able to run off the list of stereotypes, still perpetuated to this day, much to the consternation and irritation of many librarians. Since we know that perception and language shape reality, we are often hesitant to innovate out of the (once comfortable, but now suffocating) box which skews what so many would think of as disturbing the comfortable version of librarians that most have: bun wearing, shushing, legs crossed at the (thick) ankles women, with a perpetual scowl—to say nothing of the many men in the field. But the good news is that when we begin to innovate, we can call the change into existence, and begin *doing*.

There is no end to the debates about the various and new roles that librarians seem willing and able to take up, particularly in academia. Are we professors? Are we simply capable of teaching a skill set not valued by most students and, sadly, by some academics? Has the Google age set us on the path of obscurity, along with our dusty books? Are we simply in the field as the curators of knowledge? Are we the smiling, cardigan-wearing support people in one-shot instruction classes?

I have had many discouraging conversations with otherwise very intelligent people about my chosen career, in which I have attempted to dispel the gross inaccuracies and, frankly, often insulting descriptions of the work that I not only do every day, but am wholly dedicated to. What I found is not surprising: people will believe what they want to believe no matter what you tell them, and so I simply just stopped talking. Not long after I became a librarian, just a few short years ago, I remember myself and two of my colleagues walking over to the dining hall at our university for lunch. The provost and one of the academic deans were walking on the path toward us. The provost and the dean both put up their hands like they were afraid of our approach toward them: "Oh no! Somebody let the librarians out! Run for cover!" We demurred a bit, embarrassed, maybe laughed half-heartedly so that we would not seem like "poor sports." They laughed themselves silly and so did a few stray students who overheard the little scene too. Well-respected and smart men, neither of them could know the effect their behavior, well-meaning as I like to believe that it was, would have on me that day. I was so proud to be a librarian—genuinely excited to have a career I could dedicate myself to, versus a job that would pay me while I marked time dreaming of something better. It was eye-opening to see (and other evidence would be consistently presented later) that perhaps others did not see me or my profession in the same way. This bears mentioning since I have felt and sometimes still feel that some of us may be held back by tradition—that innovation is good for someone else, but not for *us* in *our* profession, though evidence of dynamic change is evident everywhere in our field. We are hurt by the negative stereotypes that are perpetuated about us because, in essence, it misrepresents us as both people and professionals and prejudices us among the very people it is essential that we collaborate with and teach: faculty and students.

Every new implementation needs groundwork to be done, needs a clearing of the path. This can be difficult if the organization or library structure that you work within has fixed ideas about a librarian's role, most especially in the classroom. My colleagues and I, for instance, worked quietly and diligently for quite some time on various initiatives such as serving on more committees, giving presentations, diligently attending faculty meetings, making one-on-one connections with faculty both in our liaison areas, but also in a gesture of collegiality. In addition, we increased our reference outreach to students by encouraging more one-on-one consultations, which are now the majority of the reference outreach that we do. I mention this because making these subtle and not so subtle shifts both benefits the work that we do with our students and increases our professional profile on campus. In my experience, this is no small feat. The effort is definitely worth results. When I saw the need to embed in two of the classes in my liaison department, I felt that I was respected and situated academically in order to approach the head of the department as well as the two professors whose classes I wanted to embed

in. I laid the groundwork and felt that, for the most part, although initially the professors did not have a very clear picture of what I wanted to do, how I would do it, and how it would benefit the students, they trusted me enough to agree. Then, of course, the real work began, but it started with a conversation and a plan. Things usually go better with a plan and I had one. But I was also cognizant of the fact that while going in with a plan, anything could happen. I decided I would be both flexible and reflective within and toward the process so that I was not only being as helpful as possible to the students in the class, but that I could assess myself in the process. Older or traditional faculty may *seem* agreeable, but may meet you with slight resistance, since they may not yet be able to see your place in the classroom, most particularly your place in *their* classroom.

Evan Farber, college librarian emeritus at Earlham College, did a considerable amount of work in the field of librarian and faculty relations—most specifically in the area of cooperation with teaching faculty. In his own words, he expressed what he believed would be the ideal: "where both the teacher's objectives and the librarian's objectives are not only achieved, but are mutually reinforcing—the teacher's objectives being those that help students attain a better understanding of the course's subject matter, and the librarian's objectives being those that enhance the students' ability to find and evaluate information."[1] In "A Report on Librarian-Faculty Relations from a Sociological Perspective" the authors assert that, owing to a variety of factors, there is an "asymmetrical disconnect" that keeps librarians and teaching faculty, for the most part, apart.[2] But, and this but is important, *only librarians view this disconnect as problematic*. This fact, in and of itself, is very telling—teaching faculty are where they need and want to be, while librarians aspire to a deeper role with and among faculty in order to fully realize the work that they do for the fuller benefit of the students. The authors go on to explain, as their research proved, that faculty really do not have a full understanding of what it is that librarians actually do, besides collection development and access to that collection. The authors stress that this does not seem to be a result of disrespect, but rather of perception, which influences the reason why faculty are not so eager for contact with librarians. Librarians, they say, perceive this disconnect through various factors such as a faculty member's protectiveness toward class time, and assumptions about lack of expertise in any given field (librarians are perhaps best known in the common consciousness as generalists, etc.). All of these factors not only influence access to the students (the common goal) but opportunities missed. There are many other factors that influence this disconnect which are beyond the scope of this book, but, suffice it to say, strides have been and continue to be made.

For many librarians it is a frustrating dynamic, this disconnect. So many of us know that if a teaching faculty member is not a regular library user, is not fully aware of the services both our brick-and-mortar buildings as well

as ourselves as library professionals can offer, how can their (our) students know? The old adage that "relationships are everything" seems germane here. Those who would like to begin any initiative within our profession, particularly in academia, cannot discount the role and importance of relationships that begin with conversation, common ground, and a plan. Embedded librarianship is an invested experience and a time-consuming one, well worth the effort, but it is *highly collaborative* and will demand open and honest conversation between teaching faculty and librarians in order to not only map out logistics but to recognize and acknowledge each other's goals, separately, and then create goals together. Common goals are an absolute necessity, otherwise, not only will students perceive a disconnect, but faculty and librarian may begin to work at cross purposes—or worse, not be effective together in any meaningful way at all, which is just a waste of everyone's time.

William B. Badke, writing about the rigors of getting faculty to understand the importance of information literacy in the classroom (which is a salient argument for any collaboration with faculty), hits just the right nerve in his assertion that we need to be proactive in our approach and position ourselves in order to demonstrate to faculty our worth in both helping them with their research needs, in addition to, of course, their students:

> Beyond helping faculty learn how to navigate the complexities of new information tools, we are in a position to put ourselves forward as information experts who can help them with many aspects of their research. This may smack of a tactical maneuver but actually represents a genuine contribution that no one but information professionals can make. If the eyes of faculty are opened to what we can do for them, we have a much better chance of convincing them that their students need to benefit from our experience as well. We are, after all, affirming the very thing that faculty most value—their ability to serve their own discipline as well.[3]

STRATEGIES TO START WITH

- Strategize and socialize. Becoming recognizable and accessible to faculty on campus, as well as students, is good for the library, the students, your colleagues, faculty, and your mission.

- Look for opportunities to engage in both friendly and meaningful conversation with faculty.

- If you liaise with one or more departments, arrange, if you have not done so already, to attend at least one department meeting which will allow you to see how the group functions and to get an idea of what their preoccupations and concerns are.

- Prearrange time with the department chair to address faculty with your ideas about embedding.

- Keep it brief but well-structured, with room for collaboration and the teaching faculty's vision, as well.

- Be prepared to offer a rationalization for why such collaboration would be a good idea. Creating talking points and anticipating questions are good ideas.

- Don't feel the need to answer every question on the spot. Stop, consider your answer, and offer to get back to someone with an answer or an opportunity for further discussion.

- Keep notes on others' thoughts and ideas.

- Follow-up with an e-mail to those in attendance with the offer of further conversation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

All in all, I truly believe that librarians must *socialize* others, particularly in academia, to the true nature of our field including our education, our research interests, and our daily activities, not as a way of justifying ourselves, but as a way of showing teaching faculty our strengths and commonalities so that the groundwork can be laid for collaboration. We also need to be able and willing to assert our knowledge of best practices in our discipline in instruction sessions that can be more than just, for instance, the "one-shot" variety or the way they have always been done. As professionals, we have the agency to assert our views to faculty and present our ideas and proposals in the spirit of collaboration—and we should. It does not mean that we will always be rewarded for our efforts or be anointed on our heads for coming up with such good ideas, but professionalism dictates that we can say, for instance: "This doesn't work anymore, but this might. How about if we try?" The aforementioned strategies are offered as a wave of paving the road, and are especially designed for the individual librarian who has a vision that is fairly begging to

be implemented, but who may be the first person in the department to do so. That was the position I was in. I learned a lot along the way.

Planning is essential, of course, but when you decide to be innovative, particularly with embedded librarianship, you may not end up in the same place you started out—we really do make our road by walking it, but that is the way it should be. Before you begin, you may want to lay some careful groundwork to increase the chances that your ideas will be met with enthusiasm and careful consideration. When librarians and faculty collaborate, all around, everyone wins.

NOTES

1. Evan Farber, "Faculty-Librarian Cooperation: A Personal Retrospective," *Reference Services Review* 27, no. 3 (1999): 229–34.
2. Lars Christiansen, Mindy Stombler, and Lyn Thaxton, "A Report on Librarian-Faculty Relations from a Sociological Perspective," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 30, no. 2 (2004): 116–21.
3. William B. Badke, "Can't Get No Respect: Helping Faculty to Understand the Educational Power of Information Literacy," *The Reference Librarian* 43, no. 89–90 (2005): 63–80.

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