

Embedded Librarianship: A Critical Perspective

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At last year's ACRL/NY event on the ACRL Information Literacy framework we invited Ian Beilin to offer some critical perspectives on the framework and I think I might have been invited here today for the same reason. I definitely don't want to do a "hatchet job" on embedded librarianship. Rather, I want to limit my hatchet job to embedded librarianship in the academic context.

I'm kidding. But I'm also not kidding. But first, let me define embedded librarianship since people often mean different things when they use the phrase. Embedded librarianship, in my view, is characterized by an extended, typically semester-long relationship between one or more librarians and a specific course in which the librarian(s) teach multiple class sessions, attend class sessions, and/or are on call to a great degree either virtually or in person in order to provide instructional or reference services over multiple class sessions throughout a semester. This kind of extended, situation- and context-specific relationship with "customers" (a term frequently found in the embedded librarianship literature) has real benefits in special libraries, I believe, particularly in corporate, medical and journalistic settings. Moreover, there's no question that certain approaches to embedded librarianship can be beneficial to our students. Embedded librarianship is one of many ways academic libraries have addressed the limitations of one-shot instruction and the difficulties we face in getting students to make use of our existing reference services, whether in person or online. We've heard about a

number of projects today that have positioned librarians as effective “guides on the side,” facilitators of active learning capable of responding to students in the authentic context of that learning.

However, I believe the embedded approach to reference and instruction services poses obstacles for academic librarians, both to our budgets and, I would say, to what I think should be our larger goal of extending and improving information literacy learning opportunities throughout the curriculum.

What I’d like to do today is simply ask a few questions about embedded librarianship and briefly point you to an alternative to it. My questions are

1. Can we afford it?
2. Is it sustainable?
3. Is it exploitative?
4. And...Who is it for?

Let’s take these points in turn.

1. Can we afford it? No, we can’t afford it.

I don’t know of any library that is currently flush with capital. And by capital, I’m not just talking about money. In libraries, our capital includes cash for resources, both materials and labor, and our librarians’ time.

Consider a typical three credit hour course. In addition to the three hours of class time, there is the time it takes to prepare for each class, the time spent creating quizzes and exams, the time coming up with new activities, the time spent working with individual students in office hours or by email, even the time getting to and from the classroom. For your average disciplinary faculty member, this time is part

of their work week. Perhaps they're on campus teaching three days a week with the other two days being used for other faculty related work, grading, scholarship, committee work, and so forth, with the weekend left for discretionary uses. Now add to the librarians' list the work of getting disciplinary faculty on board, as well as the outreach and other relationship building work needed to get an embedded project going and sustained. What percentage of the librarian's 35 or 40 hour work week does the embedded project really comprise and how does that impact the librarian's other responsibilities and their contribution to those areas of the library all must work to support?

The libraries I'm most familiar with, those within the City University system, have been and are continuing to be systematically starved of funds and their Chief Librarians are doing everything they can just to keep the doors open and service points staffed. At CUNY, material costs and staff costs are paid out of separate, non-competing pools of money, but when budgets are cut by the central administration, faculty adjunct hours are also cut. These are hours which are often used to cover reference desk shifts and sometimes course related or other forms of information literacy instruction. They are hours that allow full time library faculty to undertake more specialized projects liked embedded assignments. Fewer adjunct hours mean full time faculty librarians who are not engaged in embedded work must take on more of the shared, core workload of the library on top of the workload associated with their own specialized functions within the library. Or it means that those engaged in demanding embedded projects are not relieved of non-specialized duties,

leaving them to sacrifice or postpone work in other areas to make the embedded project work.

At private colleges and universities material and staff costs may come out of the same pot of money. At these institutions, an increase in staff levels to cover workload left by embedded librarians may have to come at the cost of book or journal purchases, leaving the library manager with a problem that may be passed down the ladder to be solved. In short, we've all been doing more and more with less and less and it's unlikely that we have or will find the capital to truly fund embedded projects.

It may be said that teaching is a labor of love and that no one works a 35 or 40 hour week. If the librarian is working additional hours for free, I think that falls into the third question I asked – Is it exploitative? – which I'll come to soon.

2. Next, let's consider our second question. Is it sustainable? No, it's not sustainable.

The librarians we've heard from today are both passionate and skilled and we need as many passionate, skilled librarians as we can find. But we know that not everyone working in libraries shares their passion or possesses the same skills. Should we invest our staff's time, our libraries' capital, establishing instructional models whose continuance is contingent upon what is likely at most a few librarians and their unique abilities? What happens if the sparkplugs behind your embedded librarian project leave the institution?

And say your library can afford to reassign one or more librarians to embedded situations. What happens if the library's finances change? Will your embedded program survive? David Shumaker, one of the main figures in the popularization of

the embedded approach, acknowledged the challenges embedded projects pose to library managers in a 2009 column he wrote for *Reference & User Services Quarterly*. Libraries, he noted, may easily enough be able to pilot embedded projects on their own dime, but what will they do if they want to expand them? He suggests that “the wise library manager will plan for success by identifying some activities that can be dropped to save money or preparing her boss for a possible request for more funds--or by asking the customer to pay directly for the new, embedded service” (Shumaker 257). He suggests the same approach—requesting funds from administrators or “customers”—if workload problems are encountered. Easily said. Not so easily done.

In my view, the wise library manager will look to invest resources in long-term, sustainable instructional projects that do not depend on the unique strengths of individuals.

3. Third, is it exploitative? Yes, it’s exploitative.

I alluded earlier to the issue of librarians working more than the hours they’re contracted to work. Librarianship is a service oriented profession and we are a caring group of people. It is therefore easy for an embedded librarian situation to become an embedded teaching assistant situation or even co-teaching situation, one in which the librarian performs more than just a librarian role. The department running the course is in those cases receiving free instructional labor. Actually, let me correct that. The department or program in which the librarians are embedded is not receiving free labor, but labor provided by, that is to say paid for by, the library department.

In theory, there is nothing wrong with this and the literature around embedded librarianship rightly celebrates the expanded instructional responsibilities librarians experience in the embedded context. But at what cost to the librarian?

If a librarian is participating in the grading of papers, is fielding student questions in numbers and scope greater than what is handled by your average non-embedded librarian, and is offering other forms of support to students, that librarian is functioning more as a course instructor than as a librarian. Again, it is not unlikely that the librarian will be working nights and weekends, either on the embedded project or to catch up on other work she has had to put off to perform her embedded function. It may be said that faculty in the disciplines work nights and weekends and that's true. However, the teaching workload of disciplinary faculty is their core workload apart from research during the academic year, whereas librarian workload includes many other components. Moreover, disciplinary faculty typically have more periods of leave – spring, winter, and summer breaks – in which to continue research and other projects begun in the academic year, whereas librarians typically do not. One cannot put off grading papers until the summer in order to concentrate on instruction, whereas one can put off collection development or a chat reference quota or a subject area research guide. A librarian's work will eventually catch up with her or fall to others. And let us be clear: self-exploitation for whatever reason, even a noble one, is still exploitation.

A non-exploitative solution is for the librarian to be hired to co-teach the course. This is a common practice in the disciplines at CUNY. When two faculty members collaborate to teach a three credit course, each instructor receives one and a half

hours towards their required yearly teaching load. If disciplinary departments or general education programs value the contributions of embedded librarians, those librarians should be hired as adjunct instructors to participate in the courses in which they're embedded. In other words, if they're already working overtime, they should be paid for it. Moreover, if librarians value it and also recognize the need for having adequate time for their total workload, they should not embed without being hired for additional hours beyond what they regularly work.

4. Last, who is embedded librarianship for? I believe it's typically more for us than it is for students.

How many students are really benefitting from the majority of embedding projects? How does that number compare to the larger student body of our institutions? How does it compare to the largest majors or graduate programs where the most specialized or quasi-professional research projects are being undertaken?

I would argue that most embedded projects reach a narrow segment of the student body leaving the majority of students with at best traditional course related, one-shot instruction and standard reference services. If this is true, why do proponents of embedding feel the need to invest so much of their resources into these attention grabbing projects? I think there are both institutional and personal reasons at work here.

First we're looking for love. All academic units are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their value to those who hold the purse strings. Contemporary management practice in higher education relies on manufactured austerity

conditions that pit campus unit against campus unit for allegedly scarce resources. Consequently, our libraries, like everyone else on campus, are always looking for ways to “prove” that what we’re doing is essential to the missions of our institutions. The conditions under which we work are such that we can’t simply assert, as I think we should, that libraries and the work we do is essential to the mission of higher education. I’m not taking a crack at the forms of learning outcomes or performance assessment we use to see if what we’re doing is working well, nor at the kind of assessment we heard about from our colleagues at St. Joseph regarding increased understanding of information literacy concepts. That’s important work. Rather I’m concerned with the flashy projects we use to demonstrate the amazing “impactfulness” of our efforts to increase student learning or success, regardless of the real numbers of students “impacted.” I’m also concerned that we seem to do all of this work not to justify increased budget requests so that we might expand such services – that hardly ever seems to happen – but simply to hold on to whatever bone our administrations may have thrown us and stave off further cuts.

But how real are the instructional benefits afforded by embedded projects? If you double the instructional support for any given cohort or class, I think you’d probably find increased student performance of one sort or another regardless of who delivers it. Our imperative is to demonstrate value. As a result, we don’t find it odd that we’re investing so much of our resources in embedded projects.

Second, the individual librarian may find it more satisfying to work as a quasi-classroom teacher than to perform some of the more mundane tasks of academic librarianship even if her work is only benefiting a small number of students. One of

the tropes you find in the literature on embedded librarianship is that it “frees” the librarians who engage in it, it lets us loose, lets us out of the cage that is the reference desk and liberates us from the “chains” of traditional reference or instruction services. You certainly find this in Shumaker’s writing (Shumaker 240). It’s an appealing image, but one that relies on a false dichotomy between the active, engaged, embedded librarian filled with initiative and vinegar and the stodgy foggy who “sit[s] behind his desk and wait[s] for reference questions” (Shumaker 240). I’m not saying that the embedded librarian may not in fact be benefiting the students she works with in unique ways, but might her time be better invested in developing more sustainable instructional projects?

And that’s where I’d like to conclude. What might we do to extend our instructional capacities beyond embedding librarians in courses? I think one approach would be to embed scaffolded information literacy learning opportunities across disciplinary curricula. Over the past several years I’ve been working with CUNY’s information literacy advisory committee, LILAC and various colleagues to do just this. The model we’ve developed involves a series of steps that also require an investment of time and resources, but which result in embedded learning activities and disciplinary assignments designed to allow students within a discipline to progress as researchers. It begins with a series of focus groups and avoids talk of “information literacy” or other LIS constructs in order to focus on allowing disciplinary faculty to paint a picture of the information-related disciplinary practices and behaviors they’d like to see their graduates embody. The activities that result from this collaborative process not dependent on librarians, but rather

are intended to become a part of the disciplinary curriculum and to be used or taught by any disciplinary faculty member who may be teaching any given course at a particular level of the major. The model we've developed seeks to position librarians as disciplinary curricular consultants and collaborative instructional designers to allow for sustainable improvements in the ways that information literacy related skills are acquired by students in the disciplines.

The model we've developed is not flashy. It does not necessarily increase librarians' workload or direct participation in the education of students within the disciplinary learning context (but neither does it preclude it). Rather, it requires a commitment to a slow process of relationship building and incremental curricular change, a process that in my view is better able to get us to our ultimate goal of improving student learning.

I don't have time to go into the details of the approach here. You can read more about it if you're interested at LILAC's website. Just Google – integrating information literacy LILAC – and you'll find our site: <https://articulation.common.gc.cuny.edu/>

You can also read more about it in an article I co-authored with Bill Badke that came out last year:

Farrell, Robert and William Badke. 2015. "Situating Information Literacy in the Disciplines: A Practical and Systematic Approach for Academic Librarians." *Reference Services Review*, 43 (2): 319-340.

My colleague at Lehman, Rebecca Arzola and I are currently working on a follow up article that expands on the work we've done with our Sociology Department.

Moreover, the approach we've developed has been included in the City University's

new five-year master plan, which I hope will bring some additional resources for its expansion going forward.

So with that, I think our moderators will transition us into our question and answer period. Thanks for your time and I look forward to our conversation.