

## FEATURE / MANCHETTE

# Musings of a student librarian: a case report of taking a course in health librarianship

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**Abstract:** One student's experience with taking a course in health librarianship at the graduate level is presented. Reflective practice is used to discuss course content, instructional methods, student learning outcomes, and the challenges presented by the course material and in-class environment. Student reflections are combined with a discussion of relevant issues in health sciences librarianship.

## Introduction

This case report presents a student librarian's learning experience during a course in health librarianship. LIBR534 [1] is an introductory course to health information sources and services offered by the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies (SLAIS) at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The student took the course during the winter 2010 term.

The purpose of this paper is to recount the experience of taking the course from one particular student's perspective. It includes personal reflections on course content, instructional methods, student learning outcomes, and challenges presented by the course material and in-class environment.

Incorporated into the personal reflections is some discussion of a few major issues related to educating and encouraging student librarians to pursue a career in health librarianship. Even at the graduate level (or perhaps, particularly at the graduate level), feelings of exclusion can arise in specialized courses in biomedicine due to the diverse backgrounds, both academic and professional, of other students. Each student enters a course on health librarianship with their own assumptions, expectations, skill sets, subject expertise, learning styles, and so on. Such diversity makes it difficult to determine the most appropriate instructional approach for best addressing the needs of the students. Yet, differences in student backgrounds, learning styles, and so on, play a role in the learning process and should be given serious consideration in course planning, design, and delivery.

The inspiration for this paper was the article entitled "Are constructivist approaches in teaching health librarians effective? A reflective case study of teaching a course in health librarianship" [2], which is a case study told from the point of view of two different instructors. This paper is in some ways a response to this case study but with less focus on the constructivist approaches taken to teach the course.

The first-person "I" is used throughout the paper since much of the content comes from the student's personal reflections, opinions, and ideas.

## Background

The course objectives, description, and syllabus for LIBR534 are posted on the SLAIS website [1] and a course wiki was available on HLWIKI Canada [3]. The course wiki was regularly updated and was a convenient go-to place for students to find course topics, assignment details, lecture slides, readings, and other course-related items. During the winter 2010 term, email and a class listserv were the primary means of communication between students and instructors outside of the classroom.

The primary instructional method was a weekly face-to-face meeting in one of the library's computer labs. Each class was three hours long and usually included a lecture given by the instructor(s), followed by a class discussion or group activity.

## Methods

This case report uses reflective practice, because the main purpose of this paper is to present personal thoughts on my learning experience throughout LIBR534 and the outcomes after course completion. Student reflections are based on the following:

- reviewing the course objectives to see whether they were met
- reviewing the topics covered in LIBR534 and comparing them to those of similar course(s) offered by other major Canadian library schools
- examining the skills and knowledge I obtained as a result of completing course assignments
- analyzing how the content and instructional method of LIBR534 affected my learning
- reflecting on challenges I experienced during the term, particularly difficulties unrelated to the course content such as the classroom atmosphere and learning environment
- identifying some important issues found in the literature as they pertain to the interconnected fields of education, health sciences, and librarianship.

## Results: student reflections

### Objectives revisited

In reviewing the LIBR534 course objectives, I can say emphatically that the objectives were met and that my learning outcomes, more or less, matched those originally intended.

In fact, I am happy with the knowledge and skills I acquired during the course. In addition to searching skills and knowledge of management issues, LIBR534 successfully opened up the world of health sciences librarianship to me while providing the essential tools and resources to further explore specific topics on my own. As a result of the course, I have a solid foundation in the essentials of health librarianship, an awareness of the field in general, as well as the confidence of knowing where to look if I want to explore further.

### The trouble with scope

Every instructor who is planning content for a course must decide which topics to include and which to exclude. This can be an arduous process of prioritizing topics and deciding to dedicate more class time to some topics at the expense of other equally important topics. Eventually the course scope is defined and limitations are imposed on the course content.

The topics covered in LIBR534 were similar to those in courses offered at other library schools in Canada, such as Dalhousie University [4] and the University of Alberta [5]. Common topics include reference and information sources on health and drugs, evidence-based practice, literature searching, health professionals and their information needs, health information literacy, point-of-care tools, health technology, management issues, scientific research, and current trends. Dalhousie University's School of Management also includes a session on corporate records management, which is an area that I am personally interested in and had hoped to encounter in LIBR534. Electronic health records are a popular, relevant topic and it is useful for health librarians to be aware of the legal and social issues involved. On the positive side LIBR534 covered bioinformatics and open access, topics that are just as relevant to health librarianship as corporate records management. The University of Western Ontario offers several courses covering specific topics in health librarianship [6], including "An Introduction to Health Sciences Librarianship", "Information Sources and Services in Science, Technology and Medicine", "Consumer Health Information Sources and Services", and "Librarianship for Evidence-Based Health Care". Students who complete all four courses will no doubt gain a more in-depth knowledge on the subject and be better prepared to begin a career as a health librarian.

LIBR534 provides a solid understanding of literature searching, and reference and information services, both of which are essential to the education of health sciences librarians. However, there was too much emphasis on searching. A broader view of health librarianship needs to be presented so that students understand the variety of roles and responsibilities assumed by health sciences librarians. In the course, there was good coverage of evidence-based medicine, while an equally important aspect of health sciences — health informatics — was given insufficient attention. Although

we had a guest speaker on bioinformatics, students would have benefitted from learning more about health informatics (imaging, clinical, and public health informatics; information retrieval; privacy and security issues related to data; how librarians fit into the world of health informatics; and so on).

### A tale of two instructors

This was the first time I had taken a course taught by two instructors, and it turned out to be an interesting experience. Both instructors were present for most classes, but each taught half of the content.

Both instructors gave the impression that they collaborated very well as colleagues, and much constructive communication flowed back and forth. I was able to learn new things just from observing the instructors' behaviours in the classroom and by listening to their conversations during lectures. Although both instructors are librarians at UBC, each has a different academic background (science versus education). In addition, one instructor is an expert in reference and information services whereas the other is head of a library division and more involved in management issues. Their different perspectives added to what was being taught in the course, and sometimes they presented opposite views on certain issues. Rather than becoming confused by their differences in opinion, I was often inspired to think more deeply and critically about issues while taking both perspectives into consideration.

### The truth about guest speakers

Over the course of the term, two guest speakers were invited to talk to the class about their own fields of expertise, which were bioinformatics and the open-access movement for scholarly publishing in medicine. The guests were enthusiastic and knowledgeable about their field of work, and gave intellectually stimulating and informative presentations. The truth about guest speakers is that students absolutely love them and appreciate the value they add to the learning experience.

### The "C" word

"C" is for challenge — the challenge of low-confidence for those entering LIBR534 with little or no science background or knowledge of biomedicine. For me, and likely for other students coming from a background in the humanities or social sciences, the first few weeks of the course were a confusing blur as we struggled to understand basic biomedical terms and concepts. More than one student was unclear about what differentiated "basic sciences" and "clinical sciences". The field of health sciences is a specialized one and students like myself would have "eased" into LIBR534 more smoothly had we been given an introductory lecture or reading material that provided clear, basic information about the biomedical sciences and health librarianship (such as Chapter 1 of Sandra Wood's text [7]).

The issue of low-confidence emerges as a result of a "knowledge imbalance" in the classroom because certain students had a strong science background or had worked as student librarians at one of the UBC health sciences libraries. Low self-confidence is inevitable, and similar struggles in other specialized contexts are likely common. A recent

study on the education needs of health librarians observes that the “lack of early training in biomedical sciences leads to a lack of confidence in librarians, especially as learning medical terminology and databases constitutes a huge challenge for librarians with a liberal arts background. This problem is exacerbated by the limited number of dedicated training opportunities in library schools.” [8]

Confidence can be increased by accounting for individuals and their learning styles. As an independent learner, I prefer to pour over library books or journal articles and share my findings in class discussions. I am less inclined to work in a group for assignments even though I will ask for help from others when needed. While collaboration was actively encouraged in LIBR534, I felt somewhat displaced at times.

There are no easy solutions to the challenge of low confidence levels in learning a new field or for resolving knowledge imbalances in the classroom. It may be useful for instructors to be more aware of this issue so that their behaviour towards students would create a more inclusive learning environment.

## Discussion

### Change is the other “C” word

Some radical changes are needed in the current library school curriculum, both in general and specialized courses on health librarianship. There are gaps in the curriculum when it comes to preparing students to meet the requirements of medical library positions, for example, background training in biomedical sciences or specialized skills and knowledge for health librarians engaged in outreach work, clinical librarianship, teaching, research, or support of systematic reviews [8].

While it is not possible for a three-month course to provide an exhaustive view of any discipline, instructors can make creative use of assignments and learning activities to encourage students to examine topics outside of the classroom. In LIBR534, students were given three search assignments and a final paper. This gives the impression that searching makes up over 60% of the job, which may be an inaccurate representation of the work in the field.

Adding variety to course assignments could be beneficial. For example, students could examine real or hypothetical health libraries and analyze their important or controversial service issues. Another exercise worth considering is a “Health Sciences Libraries in the News” assignment where students would be required to do research on a recent news item and share it during class. This could be followed by a short written essay outlining the news item and discussing its impact on health librarianship. The news item could be related to economic, legal, political, or technological developments. The didactic purpose is to get students to think about how current events influence our work as health librarians.

### The Canadian landscape (another “C,” eh?)

There is a need in Canada for studies, such as that of Petrinic and Urquhart [8], that examine the educational needs of library school students and the continuing professional development of practicing librarians. Further research focusing on the education of health librarians in

Canada is needed if educators and professionals hope to identify gaps in the curriculum. Canada is home to a number of American Library Association-accredited library schools and it is worth considering how the content of existing courses matches with the requirements in job postings. Naturally, there are major differences in the health care systems in Canada and the United States, and consequently, in the practice of health librarianship. Health librarians in Canada need opportunities to discuss those differences and the specific issues that they face on a daily basis. We need a textbook dedicated to introducing *Canadian* health sciences librarianship to students, and currently, the HLWIKI Canada [9] is as close as it gets.

## Conclusion

Despite some struggle with basic concepts and terminology at the start of this course, as well as dealing with the challenge of low-confidence in light of peers with strong science backgrounds, I was able to complete the requirements for LIBR534. There were moments when I wanted to leave the course, but upon reflection it was the right decision to finish the course.

This paper is not so much an evaluation or criticism of LIBR534 but an attempt to look at its potential impact on me as a professional librarian. While I cannot say that health sciences librarianship is my “ultimate calling”, LIBR534 was a positive learning experience and affirmed my interest in library management. When looking at the big picture, I am less concerned about the actual amount of information transferred in class than about whether I am sufficiently equipped with the skills and tools to continue learning beyond the classroom and into the profession.

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