Cultivating Teacher-Librarians through a Community of Practice

Maoria J. Kirker

As teaching continues growing as an integral component of librarianship, sustaining and developing pedagogical skills becomes a pressing need for librarians. In library departments where instructional staff with limited training in instruction must teach, providing opportunities to learn, discuss, and practice aspects of teaching is critical. In 2015, under the shadow of the emerging Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, librarians and staff of Gateway Teaching and Learning Services, a department focused on new and transfer students at George Mason University, created a series of internal professional development activities to unpack and implement the ACRL *Framework* into their instructional practice. These included a bi-weekly scholarship roundtable focused on each of the six frames and a workshop series intended to build instructional activities related to the frames and provide a space for constructive peer feedback.

Throughout this professional development series, participants answered a series of surveys about the effectiveness of the readings and workshops to determine the formats' efficacy for developing individuals' theoretical and practical knowledge about the *Framework*. The benefits of implementing a SoTL study were two-fold. First, participants wanted to capture if this format could provide adequate professional development on the *Framework*. Secondly, these activities took a considerable amount of time away from regular job duties. By using SoTL methods to assess participants' learning, participants felt that it might produce evidence to support the collective learning and benefits of the group, as well as provide a case for expanding it to the larger library community at George Mason University.

These regular roundtable discussions and workshops created an environment that fostered the development of a community of practice based on shared work and goals. Communities of practice offer a lens through which to view these professional development activities. Through this lens, this case study examines how a community of practice focused

on pedagogy, educational theory, and instructional praxis created a space for experts and novices to informally learn from one another.

Communities of Practice

Characterized by mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, communities of practice form around a group of people invested in the social knowledge construction of a particular skill or learning process.[1] In other words, communities of practice use a shared vocabulary as members learn from one another in a particular domain—e.g., information literacy instruction. Traditionally, communities of practice emerged from apprentice-based fields such as midwifery or tailoring. However, the term can be applied to informal learning communities within other professional and academic contexts. These social learning communities are driven by collaboration[2] and may include sharing work or ideas or observing each other's work. Central to communities of practice are learning skills and concepts, but the building and transfer of cultural knowledge within the community enable them to thrive. In this sense, cultural knowledge can be understood as local norms or practices within a group. For example, one library may approach teaching information literacy from a teacher-centered pedagogy while another may focus on active learning. A community of practice allows space for novice members of the library staff to learn those norms and practices from expert members. Novice members may be experienced teaching librarians but new to the community of practice. These communities allow the transfer of cultural knowledge through professional socialization, observation, and informal learning activities.[3] Members of the community of practice create the professional identity not only of the community but also of the individuals within the community through active, social participation.[4]

The relationship between novice and expert members of a community of practice is critical to understanding how they collectively function as an informal learning community. Lave and Wenger coined the term "legitimate peripheral participants" to describe this relationship. Legitimate peripheral participants learn the sociocultural practice of the community to gain full participation within it.[5] Through participation and learning from the expert members of the community of practice, legitimate peripheral participants gain mastery and expertise. Expert members must grant access to newcomers, who are judged on their ability to participate in discussions and the learning process by expert members of the group. Learning through a community of practice requires access to participation.[6] Critical to the success of a community of practice is also the acceptance that membership roles will fluctuate. Based on the goals or focus of a community of practice and participation levels, full participant and legitimate peripheral participant status may alternate.[7]

In addition to transferring cultural knowledge among expert and novice members of a community of practice, these informal learning communities dedicate themselves to the continuous learning of a skillset.[8] Academic libraries have incorporated community of practice models as informal professional development tools to varying degrees. Examples of communities of practice include the temporary creation of a learning community for

a specific purpose, such as integrating information literacy into a university curriculum,[9] and building communities of practice for more general purposes, such as training teacher-librarians.[10] By the nature of how communities of practice operate, they can become insular. SoTL offers an opportunity to make the work and knowledge production of a community of practice public. This publicizing of work can be done locally[11] or nationally and internationally through SoTL networks.[12]

Gateway Instruction Roundtable

George Mason University is a multi-campus, public research university in Fairfax, Virginia serving approximately 21,000 undergraduate FTE and 5,400 graduate FTE. Gateway Teaching and Learning Services (Gateway) is a unit within Research and Educational Services at George Mason University Libraries that supports undergraduates in general education courses and assists graduates, faculty, and community members in familiarizing themselves with the libraries. While staffing levels fluctuate, there are usually three or four instruction librarians and four or five full-time instruction specialists teaching information literacy skills within Gateway. These specialists are full-time staff members with 15 to 40 percent of their job responsibilities dedicated to instruction. Instruction specialists are hired with either instruction or library experience and thus arrive at Gateway with varying knowledge of information literacy constructs, pedagogy, and educational theory. These specialists help teach 100- and 300-level general education courses, notably freshman and junior-level English composition. Gateway Roundtable was created to provide a space where staff and librarians could learn more about teaching and learning from each other's experiences and expertise.

The Roundtable began in 2014 when instruction was the sole function of Gateway. An instruction specialist wanted to create a regular time for those who teach information literacy to gather and discuss instructional theory rather than instructional practice, which most discussions about teaching had centered around. Although discussions on theory often seemed irrelevant to members of the community, these types of conversations are critical to engaging within a research or teaching community.[13] Members of the Roundtable read scholarship on teaching and learning and then discuss the readings in the style of a graduate seminar. The goal of this is to spur creativity for instructors to apply in their practice.

Since its creation, the Gateway Instruction Roundtable meets bi-weekly during low instruction times of the academic calendar. At the conclusion of a discussion, the community or an individual library instructor selects a theme for the next Roundtable, such as sociocultural learning theory, agnotology, teaching research questions, and problem-based learning. After a theme is chosen, an instructor volunteers to select two or three short readings related to the theme. Roundtable members read the articles or book chapters and bring a list of discussion topics or questions. The instruction and assessment librarian facilitates discussion as necessary. This overarching structure follows general best practices of community of practice: designating an internal facilitator, balancing between over- and

under-structuring, and incorporating a social component to learning.[14] In cases where the Roundtable discussion lends itself to practical classroom applications, the facilitator schedules a workshop. Library instructors either individually or collaboratively prepare a lesson plan, activity, or assessment related to the week's theme to present. The workshop provides a space to brainstorm ideas, pilot learning activities, and receive constructive feedback from colleagues.

The decision to have separate components—theoretical discussions and workshops—of the community of practice was intentional and based on the professional development needs of the group. The Roundtable wanted discussions to focus on theory. Since librarianship is a field built on practice, members of the community felt space and time was needed to discuss the aspects of instruction often overlooked in formal library school and in day-to-day work. By separating time to discuss theory and time to discuss practice, the community of practice felt careful consideration for both critical aspects would follow and naturally build off one another. It provides an opportunity to connect theory and practice as instructors create new learning activities or re-evaluate existing materials.

The *Framework* Project

In preparation for the implementation of the Association of College & Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, the Gateway Roundtable tackled threshold concepts and the draft frames in the spring and summer of 2015. During seven discussions, members of the Roundtable read and discussed two to three publications selected by the instruction and assessment librarian about threshold concepts, Scholarship as Conversation, Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information Has Value, Research as Inquiry, and Searching as Strategic Exploration. One goal was for the library specialists, who expressed feelings reflective of legitimate peripheral participation, to learn from the knowledge and experience of the librarian experts. This targeted approach to learning about the *Framework* and its implications in the classroom had the following objectives:

- Build a working knowledge of the ACRL *Framework* and threshold concept theory.
- Articulate how instructors can apply the *Framework* in their information literacy instructional practice.
- Feel comfortable discussing the *Framework* and threshold concepts with library peers and instructional faculty.

Roundtable members felt a need to assess whether or not this approach to learning about the *Framework* was effective. This emerged partially from a fear that the amount of time these activities took would not be viewed favorably by upper library administration, as well as visions of expanding the roundtable format beyond Gateway and to the instruction librarian community-at-large at George Mason University. To this aim and to determine if participants met these outcomes, Roundtable members participated in a SoTL study. Before beginning the *Framework* program, members could voluntarily participate in a pre-survey

assessing their knowledge of threshold concepts and frames, as well as their application to information literacy instruction. After each Roundtable discussion, members completed a follow-up survey related to the specific frame. Following the discussion of the final frame, members completed a post-survey about the cumulative experience.

Results

At the onset of the *Framework* Roundtable series, five librarians[15] and five library specialists actively participated in the bi-weekly discussions. Six of these members completed the pre-survey. While participation in the Roundtable remained stable each week, participation in the follow-up surveys dwindled during the project. Follow-up survey responses varied from one to five participants. For each survey, participants answered the following questions:

- How well do you understand the following concept/frame (e.g., threshold concepts, information has value, etc.)?
- Please describe what the frame "[insert name of frame]" means in relation to information literacy instruction.
- Please describe how you could apply the frame "[insert name of frame]" in the library classroom.

Low response rates make it difficult to discern how well the Roundtable discussions helped improve participants understanding of the *Framework*, but there appears to be a general trend toward a better understanding after the discussion. A library specialist with little instruction experience reported a growth in understanding of the *Framework* in each of the post-discussion surveys. Another library specialist with more instruction experience shifted from abstract and theoretical discussions about the *Framework* to practical descriptions and applications in the post-discussion surveys. A librarian shifted from thinking about teaching the *Framework* from a static, lecture-based perspective to a dynamic, student-centered pedagogy.

Where the Roundtable succeeded most was creating a comfortable, social environment to discuss pedagogy, learning theory, and classroom practices. In addition to identifying where particular instructors could use more professional development in their instruction, the post-discussion surveys also highlighted areas of success for inexperienced instructors. Responses indicated increased levels of confidence in teaching information literacy aligned with the *Framework*. They also showed where participants moved from surface-level understanding to nuanced interpretations of the *Framework*. With this information, the Roundtable can shape future readings and workshops to better meet the professional development needs of its members. While the SoTL study described here concluded, it calls to attention the importance of regular surveying of the community of practice. While group discussions and workshops may highlight aspects of learning, they often fail to capture nuanced understanding and growth. By regularly surveying participants, the Gateway Instruction Roundtable group can continue growing through this social enterprise.

The Future of the Gateway Instruction Round Table

Since the *Framework* project, the Gateway Instruction Roundtable continues to meet and discuss publications related to the theory and practice of information literacy instruction, as well as educational theory in general. Maintaining a community such as this requires time, sustained interest by all of its members, and trust among colleagues to respectfully listen to each other. If the community members actively participate and contribute to discussions, the benefits to regular discussions can create ripple effects in individual instruction.

The Gateway Instruction Roundtable it is not without its challenges. The greatest difficulty has been maintaining adequate participation. The number of possible Roundtable participants varies from ten to fifteen depending upon vacant positions. In order for the discussions to be active and engaging, a minimum of five participants who have read the week's publications is desired. Given how workloads fluctuate in academic libraries, this can be difficult to sustain each week. Participation often wavers during times of the semester where instructors may experience high levels of burnout. The end of the fall semester, the busiest time of the year for Gateway, and the end of the summer when the group has met consistently for a few months, tend to see the largest drop in participation. Keeping up with the readings while staying on top of increasing workloads remains a challenge for Roundtable members.

While participation remains the most consistent challenge, a couple of challenges within the discussion also regularly occur: civility and the dichotomy between theory and practice. In this instance, civility refers to the tendency for some group members to argue with their colleagues about their ideas. While this is often done respectfully, there are moments of passionate disagreement, which can cause discomfort among the other members. In the worst cases of this, the disagreements result in a member feeling alienated, unheard, or temporarily ceasing participation. While this behavior is not encouraged, and in some cases reprimanded, it is also unavoidable when working with dedicated instructors who are passionate about student learning and may vary in communication style preference. Discussions in the Roundtable primarily center on theoretical discussions, but these often bleed into practical implications for teaching information literacy. This dichotomy is often at odds with members of the group who see this space as strictly for theoretical discussions. In a field built on practice, discussions that move between theory and practice are unavoidable. To try to alleviate these issues, the community incorporated workshops to focus on the practical nature of information literacy instruction. Participation in this SoTL study began to open conversations about the intersection of theory and practice in unanticipated ways. The results of the third survey question, "Please describe how you could apply the frame [insert name of frame] in the library classroom," reveal that Roundtable members used the theoretical discussions to the application phase. Building on these discussions as the Roundtable continues will be critical to continued success and professional development.

These challenges aside, the roundtable format creates an opportunity for professional development for all of those who choose to participate. It allows for legitimate peripheral

participants without a library science degree or extensive instructional experience to learn about instructional theory, pedagogy, and practice in a collaborative setting where everyone involved is interested in sharing and learning from each other. The goal of the roundtable discussions continues to be pulling these legitimate peripheral participants into the fold of the community of practice by sharing information and expert knowledge, fostering relationships between community members, and creating a shared context through a common language.[16] Within Gateway, these goals continue as new librarians and library specialists join the department. Those instructors new to teaching can learn from their colleagues through this informal professional development community.

In addition to creating internal professional development opportunities, one of the Gateway Instruction Roundtable's greatest successes has been fostering a space for collaboration. The Roundtable affords an opportunity not only to share ideas but also to create collaborative projects among colleagues. Through the group discussions, two instructors may realize their shared interest in developing a learning activity and begin working together. In this way, the Roundtable creates opportunities for shared work, which enhances departmental morale and teamwork.[17] In Gateway Teaching and Learning, the hallmark example of this is the collaborative creation of a departmental teaching philosophy and student learning outcomes. Small-scale examples include the creation of a problem-based learning activity and a fake news workshop for students.

Conclusion

Since the conclusion of the *Framework*-based Gateway Instruction Roundtable discussions, the community of practice continues. With occasional librarian and library specialist turnover the roundtable format allows for newcomers to acclimate to the existing culture through legitimate peripheral participation during discussions. The format allows for new ideas to emerge, new and varied opportunities for shared work, and membership status to shift based on the current topic of discussion. Gateway Teaching and Learning Services now consists of more library specialists who do not have teaching experience with teaching responsibilities. The Gateway Instruction Roundtable provides an opportunity for low-cost, internal professional development to these novice teachers. By participating in the community of practice, these newcomers not only learn from the experts but also contribute their diverse skill sets and experiences to the community.

ENDNOTES

1. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Learning in Doing (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 98.
2. Nora F. Belzowski, J. Parker Ladwig, and Thurston Miller, "Crafting Identity, Collaboration, and Relevance for Academic Librarians Using Communities of Practice," *Collaborative Librarianship* 5, no. 1 (2013): 11.
3. Noriko Hara, *Communities of Practice: Fostering Peer-to-Peer Learning and Informal Knowledge Sharing in the Work Place*, vol. 13, Information Science and Knowledge Management (Berlin:

Springer, 2009), 117, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-540-85424-1_7.

4. Jeff Jawitz, "Academic Identities and Communities of Practice in a Professional Discipline," *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 3 (June 2009): 241–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510902898817.

5. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning*, 37.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 53; Anne Lloyd, "No Man (or Woman) Is an Island: Information Literacy, Affordances and Communities of Practice," *The Australian Library Journal* 54, no. 3 (August 1, 2005): 233, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2005.10721760.

8. Hara, *Communities of Practice*, 13:118.

9. Chris Moselen and Li Wang, "Integrating Information Literacy into Academic Curricula: A Professional Development Programme for Librarians at the University of Auckland," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 2 (March 2014): 116–23, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.02.002.

10. Malia Willey, "Library Instructor Development and Cultivating a Community of Practice," in *Advances in Librarianship*, ed. Anne Woodsworth and W. David Penniman, vol. 38 (Bingly, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014), 83–100; Lisa Shamchuk, "Professional Development on a Budget: Facilitating Learning Opportunities for Information Literacy Instructors," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research* 10, no. 1 (January 2015): 1–14.

11. Renee L. Michael, "Sustaining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Campus-Based Community of Practice," *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal* 6, no. 2 (December 2012): 1–10; Stephanie E. August and Jacqueline Dewar, "SoTL and Community Enhance One Another to Create Impact At Loyola Marymount University," *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal* 4, no. 1 (July 2010): 1–15.

12. Elizabeth Marquis, Mick Healey, and Michelle Vine, "Building Capacity for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Using International Collaborative Writing Groups," *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* 8, no. 1 (January 2014): 1–34.

13. Jonathan Tummons, "Theoretical Trajectories within Communities of Practice in Higher Education Research," *Higher Education Research & Development* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 307, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.631516.\\uc0\\u8221{} {\\i{}Higher Education Research & Development} 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2012

14. Kristin J. Henrich and Ramirose Attebury, "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library: A New Approach to Mentoring at the University of Idaho," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 2 (March 2010): 161, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2010.01.007.

15. The author of this chapter is one of the five librarians, but did not participate in the study.

16. E. L. Lesser and J. Storck, "Communities of Practice and Organizational Performance," *IBM Systems Journal* 40, no. 4 (2001): 831–41.

17. Hara, *Communities of Practice*, 13:119.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

August, Stephanie E., and Jacqueline Dewar. "SoTL and Community Enhance One Another to Create Impact at Loyola Marymount University." *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal* 4, no. 1 (July 2010): 1–15.

Belzowski, Nora F., J. Parker Ladwig, and Thurston Miller. "Crafting Identity, Collaboration, and Relevance for Academic Librarians Using Communities of Practice." *Collaborative Librarianship* 5, no. 1 (2013): 3–15.

Hara, Noriko. *Communities of Practice: Fostering Peer-to-Peer Learning and Informal Knowledge Sharing in the Work Place*. Vol. 13. Information Science and Knowledge Management. Berlin: Springer, 2009. http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-540-85424-1_7.

Henrich, Kristin J., and Ramirose Attebury. "Communities of Practice at an Academic Library: A New Approach to Mentoring at the University of Idaho." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 2 (March 2010): 158–65. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2010.01.007.

Jawitz, Jeff. "Academic Identities and Communities of Practice in a Professional Discipline." *Teaching in Higher Education* 14, no. 3 (June 2009): 241–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510902898817.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Learning in Doing. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Lesser, E. L., and J. Storck. "Communities of Practice and Organizational Performance." *IBM Systems Journal* 40, no. 4 (2001): 831–41.

Lloyd, Anne. "No Man (or Woman) Is an Island: Information Literacy, Affordances and Communities of Practice." *The Australian Library Journal* 54, no. 3 (August 1, 2005): 230–37. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.2005.10721760.

Marquis, Elizabeth, Mick Healey, and Michelle Vine. "Building Capacity for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) Using International Collaborative Writing Groups." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* 8, no. 1 (January 2014): 1–34.

Michael, Renee L. "Sustaining the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: A Campus-Based Community of Practice." *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal* 6, no. 2 (December 2012): 1–10.

Moselen, Chris, and Li Wang. "Integrating Information Literacy into Academic Curricula: A Professional Development Programme for Librarians at the University of Auckland." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 2 (March 2014): 116–23. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.02.002.

Shamchuk, Lisa. "Professional Development on a Budget: Facilitating Learning Opportunities for Information Literacy Instructors." *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research* 10, no. 1 (January 2015): 1–14.

Tummons, Jonathan. "Theoretical Trajectories within Communities of Practice in Higher Education Research." *Higher Education Research & Development* 31, no. 3 (June 1, 2012): 299–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.631516.

Willey, Malia. "Library Instructor Development and Cultivating a Community of Practice." In *Advances in Librarianship*, edited by Anne Woodsworth and W. David Penniman, 38:83–100. Bingly, England: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2014.