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## Uncharted Waters: Tapping the Depths of Our Community to Enhance Learning [Conference Report]

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# UNCHARTED WATERS: TAPPING THE DEPTHS OF OUR COMMUNITY TO ENHANCE LEARNING [CONFERENCE REPORT]

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## INTRODUCTION

LOEX (formerly Library Orientation Exchange) is known for its history of conducting quality conferences that support librarians in their ongoing efforts to define and spread information literacy (IL). The 35<sup>th</sup> National LOEX Conference last May upheld this tradition. The theme was “Uncharted Waters,” and the message was clear: librarians need to take what they have already learned about library-based instruction and follow new currents that may lead even further away from traditional roles and methods, in pursuit of ultimate goals. In the following summaries of three breakout sessions, the elements of communication, clearly defined roles, and respect for librarians’ professional

expertise combine to create a navigational chart. Librarians looking for inspiration might choose to follow their colleagues’ successful routes while making their own discoveries along the way.

## SESSIONS

*How Passion and Perseverance Steered the Course Towards a University’s Information Literacy Framework, Jacqui Weetman DaCosta, College of New Jersey*

While in Leicester, England at De Montfort University, DaCosta noticed that her communications with professors were not successful. Professors expressed to DaCosta

that they sincerely wanted their students to have IL skills; however, they did not believe that IL skills should be included in their curricula. Students' assignments might require research, but a survey by DaCosta revealed the process and the concepts, including evaluation and the ethical use of information, were expected rather than explicitly taught.

Her survey results indicated an assumption by faculty that IL is somehow being communicated to students through what she labels "osmosis." Since more than half of the surveyed professors expected that students were picking up IL skills somewhere else, it is safe to suggest that the students at De Montfort were not uniformly developing IL proficiencies. Ultimately, she used her survey results to develop a plan for an institutional discussion about improving IL.

Due to the gap between faculty desires and the reality of the situation, DaCosta sought to reduce barriers in communication. If she could relate to faculty by adopting their vocabulary, addressing their values, and avoiding unnecessary library jargon, students would benefit. For example, in developing a document she called the Information Literacy Framework, she found that the term "framework" resonated with faculty better than another term, "strategy." This three-page document explained the relationship of IL to the academy, provided a grid of learning outcomes (partially gleaned from brainstorming sessions with faculty) and their associated skills, and listed examples of the IL initiatives already underway at the university.

DaCosta's successful promotion of IL as a campus-wide concern led to the incorporation of this framework into the University Program Planner's Handbook, compiled by the campus Quality Assurance Department. By recording the framework in official university guidelines, the administration showed its interest in IL as a necessary competency for graduating students. In the strongest testament to her accomplishment, the initiative begun by DaCosta and now embraced by the campus will persist despite the fact that she is no longer there to shepherd it. By shaping her communication to fit the institutional culture, align with its

policies, and address its concerns, she created a framework too useful to be dismissed.

*From Guest Lecturer to Assignment Consultant: Exploring a New Role for the Teaching Librarian, Kathleen Gallagher, University of California, Berkeley*

Gallagher has been the Librarian Fellow for Teaching and Learning at UC

Berkeley and was instrumental during the university's recent development of a consultancy framework as part of its Undergraduate Research Initiative. The purpose of the initiative was to support faculty as they incorporated resource- or inquiry-based learning, even in large lecture courses. Despite the good intentions of participants and the ambitious goals of the initiative, the first few years of collaboration between faculty and their assigned "Implementation Teams," consisting of a librarian, an educational technologist, a representative of the Graduate Student Instructors Center, and an assessment specialist, did not lead to much innovation.

After reflecting on the early failures of this initiative, Gallagher determined that fundamental assumptions about teaching and relationships between faculty and staff at the university were not being challenged. This led to the replication of comfortable, but unproductive, patterns. In her LOEX session, Gallagher gave a series of helpful recommendations to librarians who are confronting unsuccessful but entrenched approaches to instruction. She emphasized that librarians must show faculty how their expertise, through education and daily experience, guides their pedagogy in very specific ways. Librarians are experts on how students experience the research process and the ways that assignments either promote or inhibit students' development of IL. She further advised that when collaborating with faculty, librarians who want to promote new models for instruction should "avoid reproducing the pedagogy of the one-shot." Instead, they should be persistent in offering suggestions for other methods that involve the librarian as a

collaborator during the assignment design process, rather than as a guest lecturer brought in as a stopgap for the assignment's shortcomings.

Gallagher implemented these ideas for an environmental science faculty member who wanted to incorporate inquiry-based learning into an existing series of field work assignments. Her solution was a set of questions leading students through the process of considering the source they were using for each lesson. The team split up responsibility for implementing the assignment. This and other examples provided by Gallagher illustrated the principle of the librarian as collaborator, contributing to the goals of the course and guiding with her knowledge of best practices; but not taking sole responsibility for teaching and assessing IL student learning outcomes.

*A Collaborative Voyage to Improve Students' Career Information Literacy, Angela Farrar, Lateka Grays, Diane Vanderpol, University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

Attendees at this session heard from three members of a successful collaborative team that brought together an instruction librarian (Vanderpol), a subject librarian (Grays), a professor (Farrar), and one of the Career Center staff. The provocative message they delivered was to seek out potential partners for collaboration by "following the pain." Vanderpol acknowledged the situation of many instruction librarians who find themselves offering support services and making themselves available for collaboration, only to face a discouraging lack of demand for the expertise they have developed. In her view, there are some moments that lend themselves to the creation of partnerships, and in general they are during times of change. The uncertainty that accompanies periods of change is a sign that solutions are needed in order to address emerging problems or take advantage of new opportunities. It is the pain that comes with change that may cause professors or academic support staff to be more open to what librarians can offer. Vanderpol emphasized that framing

collaboration plans as the solution to this pain is a good way for librarians to achieve their goals for widespread IL.

The pain that led to the collaboration among Farrar, Grays, and Vanderpol came from Farrar's dissatisfaction with the performance of her students in a core hospitality course. She believed that her students were maintaining unrealistic expectations about the field they were training to join. The professor needed to improve her students' preparation; at the same time, resource- and inquiry-based assignments, time-consuming to grade, were becoming unfeasible due to a course size increase. By working with her partners, Vanderpol used her expertise in information-seeking behavior and assignment design to develop a solution. The proposed assignment would require research and reflection, model a real world situation, and result in a product that the professor could evaluate, given her limited time. Because Vanderpol had been so clear about what her expertise was and how she could help, Farrar saw how, together, they could close the gap between Farrar's expectations and her students' performance.

Farrar found that this newly redesigned assignment was leading her students to think about the true rigors and rewards of the hospitality industry, just as she had wanted them to. The product that students were submitting was also easier to evaluate than a research paper would have been. The issue of professors' unmet expectations and time constraints are a common cause of pain on any campus, and librarians can offer a great deal of help. Vanderpol noted other changes that can bring "pain" for which librarians and IL may be the solution, including grant awards that need to be spent and require collaboration; cuts to funding that require new approaches; new campus administrators with pet projects, among others. In the end, it's about turning a problem into an opportunity that ultimately benefits students.

## CONCLUSION

The themes of this selection of presentations—

engaging the wider academic community in partnership, communicating across institutional cultures, and revealing the role of librarians as experts—were common not only in the formal conference programming, but also in the informal conversations that took place among participants all weekend. Librarians who have embraced IL as the best way to prepare students for success in the academy are still looking for paths that lead away from solely library-centered efforts and their limited results. Sharing what librarians know about the research process and students' information seeking behavior with campus communities will bring significant changes. Librarians will need to thoughtfully consider the best ways around barriers and how to get the most benefit from their efforts.

For more information and materials from LOEX 2007 and future LOEX conferences, visit <http://www.loexconference.org/>.

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