

Lifelong Learning and Instructional Services for Adult Learners through OLLI

Merinda Kaye Hensley, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Instruction librarians are vocal advocates of critical thinking and lifelong learning. Our vision is increasingly embedded within the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate education. However, there is a new set of students in academia that is emerging and one that we should prepare to teach: adult learners. Changing demographics means that adults are returning to the academy in droves, looking for robust and active learning environments that parallel their college days. On campuses around the country, one avenue adult learners are pursuing, without having to formally enroll in the university, are lifelong learning courses arranged by their local Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. With support from the Bernard Osher Foundation¹, over 100 colleges and universities have on-campus Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes (OLLI)² which draw upon the expertise of teaching faculty to create new courses formulated for the over-50 demographic. The courses are non-credit opportunities that don't require homework but do mirror the academic classroom experience of engaging critical thinking skills on topics such as "America's Ancient Chiefdoms, 1539-1543," "Friedrich Nietzsche: Threat or Menace?," "Race, Gender, Class in Movies of the 1950's," "Small Mammals: How they Compete and Contribute," and "The Unknown Age of American History: 1660-1763" (specific courses vary from campus to campus; all of these examples are courses offered in Spring 2012 at Illinois). For a relatively small annual fee (e.g., \$125), members of the local community may join OLLI and take courses (typically \$25 a course), participate in free study groups, attend lunch-time lectures, sign up for world traveling experiences, and most importantly for us, access library resources.

What type of instructional opportunities should librarians create that would be most beneficial for adult learners in this context? Although they may be years removed from their initial higher education experience, adult learners face similar issues as our current students in refining their information literacy skills, such as getting acquainted with the institutional online catalog and being able to cull through reference resources; however, their learning goals are not the same. The landscape of information and the ways in which we deliver information has changed drastically but adult learners bring critical life experiences to the table that can help effectively deal with this. King and Kitchener (2002) describe a model of reflective thinkers where adults are "consistently comfortable in using evidence and reason to support their judgments, and accepting that new data and new perspectives may emerge as knowledge is constructed and reconstructed. As a result, they remain open to reevaluating conclusions and knowledge claims. (p. 6)³" This evolved learning process creates a learning environment that is much different than the classrooms where we teach undergraduates how to evaluate Wikipedia articles. How can instruction li-

brarians adapt to the needs of OLLI members and what opportunities arise in these new classrooms?

OLLI at the University of Illinois

When the OLLI program began at the University of Illinois in fall 2007, campus leaders negotiated borrowing privileges to the library, the largest public research institution library in the country. Instruction for new users quickly became an issue when OLLI advertised this access to the library as one of the prime benefits of membership. Immediate questions arose regarding the extent of borrowing privileges, how information is organized, and what services the library has to offer. An instructional program needed to be developed that would pedagogically embrace adult learners while working in synergy with the OLLI educational mission of focusing on older adults who are not really focused on upgrading career skills but more on "learning for the joy of learning."

With many of the OLLI members already affiliated with the university as retired faculty and staff, basic technology skills were not the high level concern as documented in other institutions' OLLI programs⁴. This allowed planning to focus on orientation workshops that explain the more fundamental operational details of using the library: How many books can I check out at once? What are the late fees? How do I access Consumer Reports from my home computer? Can I download that ebook to my Kindle? Along with these basics, we still needed to teach OLLI members to navigate the library website, the online catalog, and research databases (i.e., areas we usually cover with undergrads) so that members could use the library's resources to answer other questions related to their courses. However, concessions needed to be made in lesson planning that are realistic about the expectations placed on OLLI members to understand our complex searching systems. It isn't that members are not capable of learning how to search for a specific journal title, it is that they are more likely to want to read the daily newspaper without having to maneuver between the labyrinth of webpages and ever-changing interfaces. Therefore for this population, a little help goes a long way in creating a path to the resources adult learners are likely to use most often. To that end, we created a LibGuide⁵ that includes simple instruction and links through the proxy server to daily newspapers, magazines, and a variety of mainstream academic journals. While there are some types of research that adult learners are more likely to engage, including searching for health information, our OLLI members have not expressed an interest in the esoteric literature of the disciplines. That being said, most members are not performing in-depth research, but instead are looking for materials to support the complicated nature of the courses they are taking. Although members do have access to consortial borrowing and interlibrary loan services, we do not focus

instruction time on this process since the local public library may be a better venue for borrowing books that are not in the Illinois library. Another benefit to offering a general library workshop is that it provides an opportunity to talk in a larger context about the educational role of librarians so that members are empowered to request specific library services as needs arise within their OLLI experience. And finally, adult learners appreciate library as place and building tours are an effective way to share anecdotes about the library while orienting members to the way things work.

What is missing from the orientation to the library? We do not teach OLLI members how to evaluate information resources as is our common focus with undergraduates. Instead, we help members become acquainted with what resources the library has to offer, show them how to access those materials and then we look for opportunities that will shine a light on specific collections. Since courses are sans homework, librarians are rarely called upon to teach in classes taught by non-librarians (i.e., there are relatively few one-shots) but there is an endless supply of topics that support ongoing exploration of library resources. The easiest way to construct learning opportunities is to think outside of our conventional teaching in order to create new learning experiences that function within the structure of the library organization. For example, one of the first courses we created, "The Things We Keep: Capturing and Preserving our Cultural Heritage," was a six-week session that concentrated on developing an understanding of the roles played by institutional archives and libraries in preserving America's diverse heritage through books, music, artifacts, and personal papers. Each week members engaged in conversation with various librarians who work with special collections. This session mirrored the other sessions offered as part of the OLLI curriculum. Oftentimes, ideas come to life that are the passion of a particular librarian. For example, lunchtime lectures build upon the expertise of librarians while providing a venue to share our collections in ways that the traditional undergraduate course-integrated instruction session does not. Recent sessions have included a talk on book theft and an eight-week series titled "These Are a Few of My Favorite Things," where the curating Rare Book librarian presents personal selections of ten "treasures" and leads a discussion of their significance. The library also offers free, one-time workshops on a variety of topics, many at the request of OLLI members. Social media sessions on Facebook, Twitter, and Skype are popular as well as informational sessions about how to find authoritative health information. And finally, one of the most well-received sessions to date was designed around the novel *Loving Frank* by University of Illinois alumnus, Nancy Horan. In partnership with the Alumni Association and OLLI, we organized a lecture with a prominent Frank Lloyd Wright campus scholar, convened a book talk with the author, and adventured out of town for a day trip to visit the Frank Lloyd Wright Prairie School of Architecture National Historic District and Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois. Much of this Wright activity was organized and supported through use of a LibGuide. It is these types of learning ex-

periences that make working with adult learners refreshing from our daily routine.

Conclusion

Librarians are increasingly being tasked with outreach and coordinating instructional opportunities that lie outside the prescribed disciplinary model. The library can be a crucial partner in the mission of the academy to promote reflective learning opportunities that are at the center of the OLLI experience. This builds good will across campus and the local community. At the heart of its mission, OLLI advocates that "lifelong learning is not determined by where you learn, but how⁶." OLLI members can also be among the library's impassioned supporters, responding to requests from library advancement, becoming members of Library Friends, and a few of our members have even found volunteer opportunities within the library. As we build relationships, we use informal assessment strategies to frequently gauge what kinds of questions OLLI members have about the library and its resources while working to deliver new sessions each semester. In the promotion of challenging learners to explore new intellectual avenues, the library is a partner in growth, a place where adults learners can extend their path of lifelong learning. Simply providing access will not be good enough, we need to consider how we are going to help them use the information they need.

References

1. The Bernard Osher Foundation: <http://www.osherfoundation.org/>
2. Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes: <http://www.osherfoundation.org/index.php?olli>
3. King, P.M. and Kitchener, K.S. (2002). The reflective judgment model: Twenty years of research on epistemic cognition. In B.K. Hofer & P.R. Pintrich (Eds.), *Personal Epistemology: The Psychology of Beliefs About Knowledge and Knowing* (pp. 5-18). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
4. Smith, Ngairé I. R. (2012). Teaching Computer Skills to Senior Citizens: A Library Assistant's Learning Experience. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 49(1). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol49/iss1/9>
5. Library Services for OLLI: <http://uiuc.libguides.com/olli>
6. Lamb, R. (2012). Lifelong Learning Institutes: The Next Challenge. *LLI Review*, 6 (Fall 2011), 1-11.