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Practice-Based Learning in LIS Education: An Overview of Current Trends

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Abstract

Practice-based learning (PBL) has been a staple of the preservice curricula of Library and Information Science (LIS) programs. While the status/importance of PBL continues to be debated in LIS education in the United States, an increasing number of programs offer these experiences to their students in the form of practicums, internships, fieldwork, service learning, or community-based projects. This article will look at the most recent statistical data on fieldwork experiences offered by LIS schools and examine the ways in which these practical experiences are organized and infused throughout the curricula. While the focus will be programs accredited by the American Library Association in the United States, reference will be made to international curricula where applicable.

Introduction

Practice-based learning (PBL) has been a staple of the preservice curricula of Library and Information Science (LIS) programs since the late 1800s, initially as a tangible way to supplement the information presented in textbooks, but later as the means to ensure adequate professional preparation (Brannon 2014). While the status/importance of PBL continues to be debated in LIS education in the United States, an increasing number of programs offer these experiences to their students in the form of practicums, internships, fieldwork, service learning, or community-based projects. Such courses provide an opportunity for the LIS student to gain experiential knowledge to bolster the theory covered in the classroom. Given the fact that the Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) is a professional degree, it follows that there would be a focus on preparing students for the day-to-day realities of professional practice. This no-

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tion is consistent with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) inclusion of practice-based experiences as an important principle of the LIS curriculum in their *Guidelines for Professional Library/Information Educational Programs*:

> The programme should incorporate appropriate means to allow students, in a practical way, to appreciate the interplay between professional theories and their application in professional practice. Depending on the required learning outcomes, it can also include applied project research and/or projects that involve authentic practical activities, undertaken in a placement environment (IFLA 2012).

Bird, Chu, and Oguz (2016) distill much of the positive aspects of PBL in their international examination of internships in LIS education. Their review of existing scholarly literature corroborates the premise that students who participate in these opportunities achieve a better understanding of their chosen profession and can better link theory and practice. They also suggest that LIS programs benefit equally by using the results of internship experiences to assess and align their curricula to current practice. However, they found "that outside of American Library Association accredited institutions, internship is more often required and that when it is not, participation rates are low" (298). In addition to providing a comprehensive overview of the varying perceptions of PBL in LIS education in the United States, Brannon (2014) summarized the findings from seventeen surveys of library schools conducted during 1896 and 2002 to determine the number of schools that offered and/or required a fieldwork option and the typical credit hours to which these options were assigned. From the data summary, it was clear that most of the schools responding to the survey from 1975 to 1989 offered an experiential learning course, but very few required it. These findings are part of a larger study to determine how schools assess students pursing a practice-based course, which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

This article examines both the most recent statistical data on fieldwork experiences offered by LIS schools and the ways in which these practical experiences are organized and infused throughout the curricula. While the focus will be primarily on programs accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) in the United States, reference will be made to international curricula where applicable.

Approaches to the Provision of Fieldwork Courses in LIS Programs

The LIS Professional in the Twenty-First Century

A key component of PBL is its ties to the demand of the workplace. While the professional ethics and core competencies of LIS remain stable, the pace at which the technology through which information delivery is evolving and the importance of meeting the increasingly diverse information

and cultural needs of those served by libraries and information centers has presented some challenges. Nonthacumjane (2011), among others, examines and discusses the key skills and competencies required of LIS practitioners, as gleaned from studies that conduct content analysis of job advertisements, and categorizes them as generic (interpersonal/communication, general computing, team work), professional (customer service, cataloging classification and metadata), and personal (enthusiasm, flexibility, and self-motivation). The Special Libraries Association (SLA) Competencies Task Force identified a set of "enabling competencies" in their statement of *Competencies for Information Professionals* approved in 2016. They described this category as being "vital for professional success and career development" and included characteristics such as

- critical thinking;
- initiative, adaptability, flexibility, creativity, innovation, and problem solving;
- effective oral and written communication;
- relationship building, networking, and collaboration;
- marketing;
- leadership, management, and project management;
- life-long learning;
- instructional design and development, teaching, and mentoring; and
- business ethics.

While it is possible for LIS students to cultivate these skills solely in a classroom setting, it is unlikely that they would master them outside of experiential learning opportunities. The key to ensuring that these experiences meet the expectations of the students and the demands of the workplace depends on the placements being interesting and rigorous enough to promote the acquisitions of the wide skill set required. The next section will examine the nature of characteristics of these opportunities.

PBL in LIS Programs in the United States

In addition to the various statements of professional competencies already discussed, the Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) adopted comprehensive *Guidelines for Practices and Principles in the Design, Operation and Evaluation of Student Field Experiences.* These guidelines were adopted in 1983 and reaffirmed in 1990 and hold as the standard for the organization and presentation of field experiences, which it defines in the following way:

> Experiential education means learning by experience in a professional work setting. This learning is a joint undertaking of the student, faculty advisor, and work supervisor, and is accomplished by their cooperative efforts. Although the primary responsibility for a given aspect of field experience may rest with the student, faculty member or work supervi-

> sor, all facets of the field experience from the initial development of learning objectives to the final evaluation are a shared responsibility.

The guidelines delineate the elements of a comprehensive plan that maps the student's learning objectives, responsibilities, and administrative elements of the field experience; in addition to the roles and responsibilities of students, faculty, and the field supervisor. Suggestions for evaluating the performance are also included.

To better understand the extent to which LIS programs adhere to these guidelines, ALISE's (2016) statistical report was examined to determine which programs currently offer experiential learning opportunities. According to the report, 58 of the responding LIS programs offered a fieldwork course for credit, with 25 schools designating it as a requirement. Forty-seven schools offered fieldwork for 3 credit hours; 13 schools assigned 6 hours; and 6 schools designated 12 hours. While those configurations were the norm, the remaining schools varied considerably, ranging from one-credit fieldwork courses to a potential 252 credits.

PBL courses listed in the ALISE survey were most commonly referred to as internships, practicums, or field studies, but a few were also labeled as "practical experience" or "community engagement." Though there is significant overlap in the meanings of these terms, Lim and Bloomquist (2015) distinguished between the definition of the word *practicum* in the LIS context as **"**an unpaid on-site library experience that takes place during the educational process and is professionally supervised" and the National Association of College Employers' (NACE) definition of an internship as "a form of experiential learning that allows students to gain experience in a professional setting, enabling them to develop new professional skills in the fields they are considering for career paths" (2011, 201). They also discuss some of the other distinctions that LIS scholars have made between the two. For example, they cite Leonard and Pontau's (1991, 201) categorization of internships as "post-graduate experience[s], or one reserved for experienced librarians," while a practicum takes place "during the LIS educational process."

Ironically, as Lim and Bloomquist note, many of the elements included in Leonard and Pontau's model for a structured practicum contained elements that are identical to internships. However, they also include Riddle's succinct description of a practicum serving as a "laboratory" to test class-learned concepts, while internships afford "career and job sampling opportunities" (as cited in Lim and Bloomquist 2015, 201). These definitions and distinctions become salient when one considers the structures and supports that sustain each iteration of the courses offered, as well as the overarching thesis of Lim and Bloomquist's exposition that service learning is a separate and distinct form of experiential learning

In quite a few cases, LIS schools distinguished between the practical experience course required for the School Library Media Program (SLMP),

while others offered one course offering that could be tailored to the needs of the students and/or the area of specialization. A clinical/practical experience is a requirement for certification as a School Library Media specialist, so it is no surprise that it is a curricula component in schools that offer that option. However, Mardis (2007, 218), in her study of the role of the practicum in the transition from teacher to school library media specialist in Michigan, noted that many of the teachers pursuing the school library certification "did not appreciate the need for a practicum . . . and resisted taking time from their classrooms to complete field experiences that they felt were unnecessary duplications of past student teaching experiences." Mardis's study attempts to employ a Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) of teacher development to map the dispositions of the preservice students as they progress through their practicum experience. She also sought to determine what students identified as critical incidents that either altered or solidified their classroom-based thinking. Though the number of participants were limited, the objectives and findings of this study are important to consider and incorporate into SLMP clinical experiences for students with extensive experience in the field of education. She advises:

> School library media education programs may wish to impart specific knowledge about the stages they will encounter as they progress from teacher to media specialist. By allowing students to experience dismiss information specialist and program administrator early in their practicum, they experience valuable opportunities to embrace the aspects of their new roles with which they are least confident. (2007, 233)

Another configuration was the availability of a general practical course and different sections that were much more refined in scope. For example, the University of Wisconsin at Madison offers the Field Project in Library and Information Agencies course for school and other libraries and a separate Teaching and Learning Services Practicum course for on-campus students only, which is a coordinated effort between the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) and the campus libraries. It involves teaching information literacy courses, observing and assisting with information literacy sessions for a required course, extensive work with projects at a home-site library, and regular seminar meetings to discuss learning theory, lesson planning, and other relevant topics (https://slis.wisc.edu). Other schools only require a practicum or internship for a specific area of specialization. For example, and as noted in the ALISE survey, Emporia State required a practicum for their Master of Science (MSc.) Informatics only. The University of Maryland offered an internship in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) for the Masters degree in HCI and a Field Study for the MLIS, while Pratt requires a practicum/seminar and a course entitled Community Building and Engagement for the MSc in Museums and Digital Culture only.

In keeping with the ALISE guidelines, enrollment across most of these practice-based courses is student initiated and contingent on the completion of a stipulated minimum number of courses. The student is also expected to consult with a faculty advisor prior to selecting a site or completing the requisite paperwork. Placement must be confirmed ahead of registration, which requires confirmation from the selected site supervisor. Many schools that offer practicums/internships maintain a database of partners and collaborators that include libraries, museums, and nonprofit organizations from which the student can select a potential site. The library program at Denver University goes one step further and hosts an annual showcase of learning opportunities at community organizations across the Denver metropolitan area and abroad. The program details states that "throughout their coursework, all LIS students are encouraged to get hands on experience by obtaining internships and volunteering at libraries, museums, and other information settings," though second-year students must complete a four-credit practicum before graduating (Denver University). In the absence of these supports, students must independently identify and secure the participation of a site and a practitioner willing to serve as a mentor. Some schools also stipulate that the student cannot complete their field experience in the same unit in which they were or are actively employed. For those who work as paraprofessionals in information settings, some schools offer the option to submit a request for a waiver or to pursue a research project instead.

Both paid and unpaid internships are considered for credit in most of the programs examined. However, some opportunities involve the submission of a direct application from which selection is determined. Yearround practicums and internships are often associated with competitive scholarships and fellowships that afford an intensive and structured experience but are subject to selection from a pool of applicants. Pratt offers a two-semester practicum scholarship designed to provide students with an "exceptional professional-level experience" (Pratt Institute). Students are required to complete 120 credit hours per semester at one of the school's partner institutions. The School of Information at Florida State University offers a "fully-funded opportunity to work and study in Florence, Italy" (Florida State University). Students enrolled in the MSLIS majors are solicited and vetted in the fall semester of one year for participation in the subsequent academic year.

With the increase in fully online offerings, virtual internships have emerged as an alternative to placement in a physical library or center. Oguz (2013) observed that an increase in the online delivery of LIS education in the United States did not result in an equivalent change with respect to internship experiences. On their website, San Jose State University describes their student preferences for their experiential virtual selections as follows:

> They enjoy flexibility in fitting the internship experience into their busy personal and professional lives, since work can often be completed evenings and on weekends. They have the opportunity to learn from experts in their field regardless of their geographic location. They strengthen their information and computer skills as they employ technology to communicate with their site supervisor and conduct their work. (San Jose State University)

The Internet Public Library (IPL) and the GALILEO Knowledge Repository have served as sites for virtual internship opportunities as well. Outside of the United States, the Enterprise University Virtual Placement (EU-VU) project, which is funded by the European Union, "attempts to place students virtually at various organizations across national boundaries so that they can enhance their skills" (Bird, Chu, and Oguz 2016, 301). Franks and Oliver (2012) provide further details on the features of virtual internships and the potential for international collaboration.

As suggested, the most critical component of the agreement between the student, advisor, and site supervisor or mentor is ensuring that there is sufficient exposure to relevant experiences and opportunities to perform a variety of professional tasks, in addition to the completion of some product/s or project that satisfies the academic component of the arrangement and contributes to the overall assessment of performance. Reflection is also an important dimension of PBL, as it allows students to construct clear connections between theory and practice. Consequently, many of the required and optional practicum/internship courses extend and intensify the process and product by including a seminar or a capstone component as well. The Department of Information and Library Science at Clarion University requires students to complete a fifteen-page evaluative paper that reflects on the synthesis of the student's preparatory coursework, internship experience, and supplemental professional reading, along with examples of work products produced during the internship (Clarion University 2014). San Jose State University offers an internship for the Master of Archives & Records Administration (MARA) that is evaluated by several instruments depending on the stated goals, outcomes, and products associated with the internship. They include

- online discussion via their Canvas LMS;
- a weekly reflective blog post;
- a monthly status report that records and analyzes the learning opportunities and challenges encountered;
- a final report detailing how course objectives were met;
- the student's evaluation of the site;
- the site supervisor's evaluation of the student; and
- any additional requirements as determined by the faculty supervisor.

Brannon (2014) looked specifically at the evaluation form that site supervisors are expected to submit. She collected and analyzed forty-seven

forms by inductive content analysis from ALA-accredited LIS schools and mapped the attributes gleaned to the *ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship*. Brannon found that the evaluation forms varied widely from school to school and most did not incorporate the core competencies and other practical skills that supervisors were keen to evaluate. Brannon proposed a modified version of the form with four sections covering general introductory information, a rating table of core competencies, an assessment of personal characteristics, and an open-ended invitation to provide final thoughts.

Supplementing/Augmenting PBL in the LIS Curriculum

Beyond providing dedicated experiential opportunities, many LIS schools incorporate experiential learning throughout the curriculum. These opportunities are often in the form of service-learning or community-based participatory research, project-based assignments, simulations, or observations. Before delving further into a discussion of its manifestation, it is important to delineate once again the meanings of the terms as expressed. Lim and Bloomquist (2015,112) define service learning as:

> a course-based, credit bearing, educational experience in which students (a) participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs, and (b) reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of personal values and civic responsibility.

The reflective component, which is such an intrinsic part of the practicum and internship experience, is also a necessary component of embedded experiential coursework. In many cases, both the student and the teacher must grapple with a high degree of ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounds the offer to address a need expressed by a community partner. The activity of community-based participatory research (CBPR) requires that academic participants be acutely aware of the enactment of power and the willingness to grapple with issues of social justice; therefore, CBPR demands rigor, an additional layer of commitment, and a heightened sense of consciousness. There are many ways in which the incorporation and use of these methods enhance learning, and a few will be discussed here.

Wolske, Rhinesmith, and Kumar (2014) present the Community Informatics Studio Pedagogy as a progressive form of classroom learning that extends previous iterations of CI and Studio Based Learning (SBL). The approach is steeped in learner-centered, social constructivist, and community engagement approaches to design issues, problem-solving, or specific case studies. At Dominican University, the Community Informatics course, an elective in the School of Information Studies, was combined with the Program Evaluation course—a required course in the School of Social Work—to bring together LIS and social work students to learn more about

and from each other while completing a CBPR task with an organization serving the West Side of Chicago. The collaboration not only proved to be eye-opening to the students who were all somewhat ignorant of the day-to-day roles and scope of each discipline and profession, but it also helped LIS students in particular understand more fully the nuances of community engagement and allowed social work students the opportunity to understand how technology and information can be effectively manipulated to enhance community development.

Another example of incorporating experiential learning opportunities into a new or existing course comes from the case study by Martin and Martinez (2016, 84–85) of the impact of a games-based curriculum on the LIS classroom and practice. The first iteration of the course allowed them to immerse LIS students in the process of playing games and understanding their use as a tool of engagement in the library setting, with a final product that required them to "propose a potential design for a game, recurring board game night, or games camp." The second iteration required students to research and discuss the theories and scholarship behind the promotion and use of, as well as the interest in games in libraries and similar settings. Students were expected to host a game-based workshop at a local library at the end of the five-week session, which allowed them to internalize that "a rapid process from thought to creation is feasible." Because of the active participation and engagement-sustained course, students developed "flexibility in thinking and [new] approaches to finding information" as well as "desirable twenty-first century skills like augmentation, collaboration, and soft skills."

Conclusion

Practice-based learning has earned its place on the LIS curriculum in most LIS programs. When created with students at the center of the process, PBL contributes to their workplace readiness and their burgeoning identity as LIS professionals. Additionally, experiential learning experiences afford them the opportunity to cultivate the desired and desirable personal skills through its emphasis on flexibility, responsiveness, collaboration, and critical thinking. To accomplish these benefits, LIS programs and professors must routinely engage with the up-to-date needs and challenges faced by practitioners and partner institutions and find ways to facilitate these discussions among their students prior to their forays into the field. Bird, Chu, and Oguz (2016) emphasized the need to infuse the four Is of intentionality, interconnectedness, interdisciplinarity, and an international orientation throughout any design of a fieldwork experience. From the examples referenced in this article, it is evident that LIS programs are attending to these areas—though to varying degrees—to ensure that these components also become a part of the professional ethos.

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