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Librarians As Teachers: An Interview With Oregon State University Librarians Bonnie Avery and Loretta Rielly

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Librarians as Teachers:

An interview with Oregon State
University Librarians
Bonnie Avery and Loretta Rielly

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Over lunch, Bonnie Avery, Loretta Rielly and I discussed librarians as teachers. I was hoping for a revelation on how to be the perfect teacher: how to do that brilliant one-time “how to use the library” talk and know the students walked away changed beings; how to always be prepared at the drop of the hat; how to be vivacious, funny, authoritative, respected, and empathetic without piercing various body parts; how to know I was successful. While I wasn’t struck down with a vision of library instruction nirvana, I absorbed a range of observations, advice and reflections from a couple of pros. Perhaps more important than advice, Bonnie and Loretta reminded me that there is more to teaching than ensuring that students are information-literate, and more to being a librarian than making sure each person gets a useful piece of information. We want them to value libraries and the information we handle, and recognize their investment in libraries is a life long social good.

What follows are somewhat random points that I heard and remembered. Some are obvious observations. Others may cause you to reflect. In total, they remind me of why it remains fascinating and challenging to work and teach in a library.

Observations about Faculty

- Physically changing the library (i.e. our massive renovation or a more minor shifting of the collection) forces professors to re-examine their assignment. They have to talk with librarians and even come into the library to figure out where things are. The handout telling students to use the index on the third floor just doesn’t work anymore.
- The early days of the Web gave librarians a foot in the door with faculty. For a while, we knew more than they did. This still works in some cases where faculty members have not connected.

Observations about Students

- Students work in our Information Commons (built up from the Information Garage) and we have learned to work with them. During the remodeling, we got used to walking around and interacting with students. It is like working in a large classroom as opposed to the old Reference Desk and Reference Area that was akin to monitoring a study hall.
- Librarians forget that to many students using the library and asking librarians for help are risky undertakings. Awareness of their risk taking is important.

Reflections on Teaching

- Preparation time is often underestimated.
- Teaching is repetitive.
- Teaching takes practice and repetition can make you better.
- Teaching is exhausting if you are really working at it. That’s why a busy shift at the Reference Desk can leave you tired. You’re teaching the whole time with barely time to catch your breath.
- What works with one age group often works with another.
- A student can be successful without using the library.
- Today’s students are less forgiving. They believe that the computer systems should do it all.
- Competencies measure the short-term. We are here for the long-term.

Advice

- Encourage reiterative contacts with students after you’ve taught a session. Hang around after the class and encourage the use of e-mail.
- If you are using a computer lab setting, honor the setting. Let the students do hands-on work.
- Do something interactive every 10 to 15 minutes. Have them write a brief paragraph on their research question. Ask a question and elicit answers. Let them do a search. Use a worksheet.
- Teach evaluation, not just the mechanics.