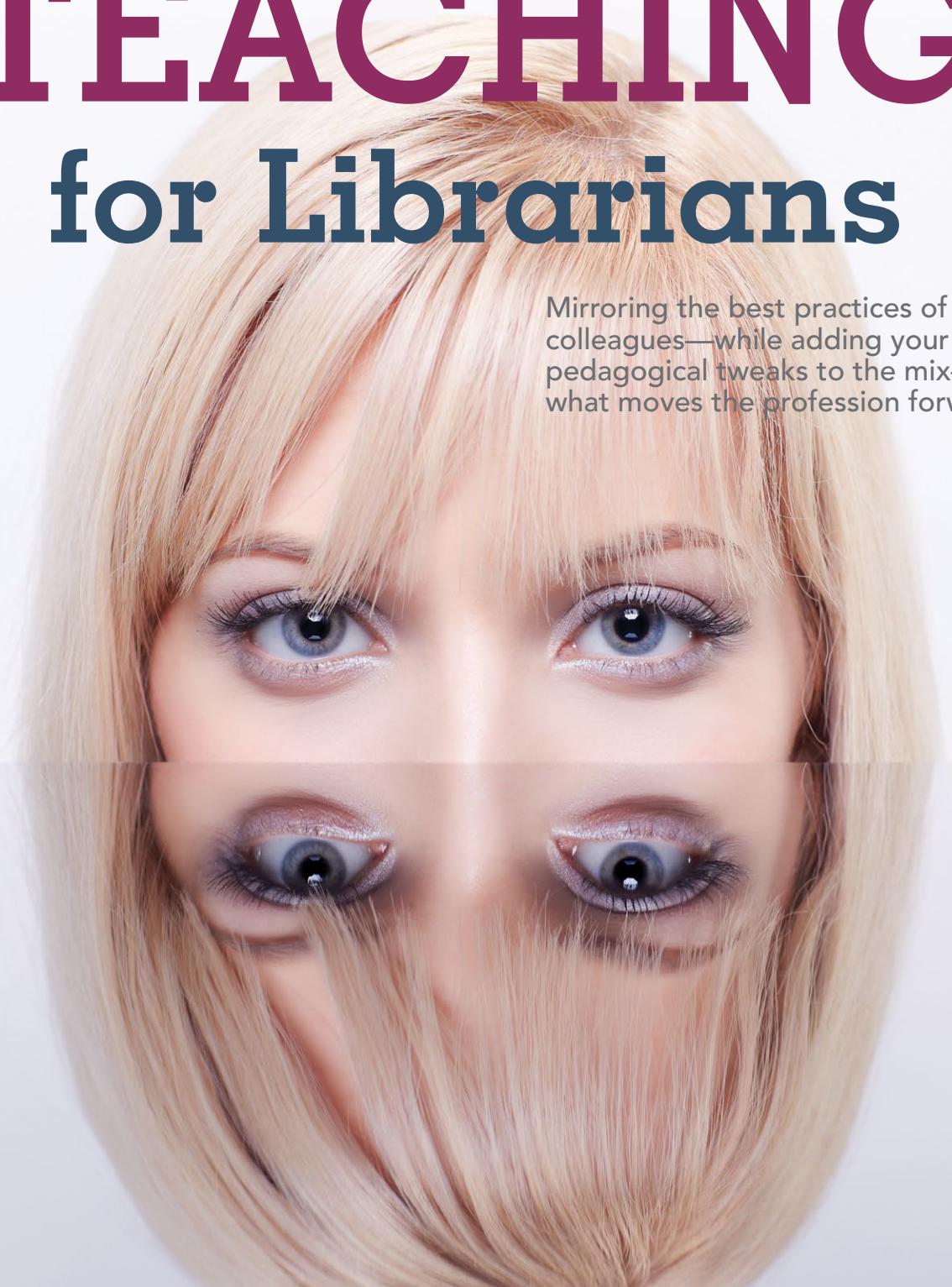


By Char Booth

# Reflective TEACHING for Librarians

Mirroring the best practices of colleagues—while adding your own pedagogical tweaks to the mix—is what moves the profession forward



**M**ost librarians are educators in one sense or another, even when the role is not explicit. The best teachers learn from others and learn by doing. This is a good rule for improving at virtually anything: Seeking inspiration and accepting criticism makes your work richer and more well rounded. Many of the ideas I present here I first observed among friends and teachers whose methods I admired or whose recommendations led me to a new approach or tool. Through mentorship, coteaching, professional organizations, online forums, and other channels, I have expanded my own method base and gained a clearer perspective on my impact as a communicator and designer.

## Gleaning

Research and attentiveness build a composite of ideas collected through chance and diligence, which is similar to a reflective concept I call *gleaning*—incorporating the connections that naturally occur through collaboration, participation, and simply moving through the day into whatever you happen to be working on. It is a mindset in which you notice potential solutions to the challenges you face and make use of the resources around you. From DIY to getting things done, popular approaches to gleaning recognize and celebrate the good ideas and tactics of others, and can inspire you to incorporate new skills into your own practice.

Gleaning grows out of a willingness to become an active and interested sponge, and involves four elements: *observation*, *documentation*, *integration*, and *acknowledgement*. As you observe others teaching and presenting as well as working with learning objects, you can consciously document how the strategies colleagues use might support your own style. But don't confuse integration with appropriation: If you ask coworkers for an old handout or lesson plan, don't simply copy their approach to make your life easier (which is little better than opportunism). Instead, consider their angle, recognize the work they have already put in, and supplement it with your own ideas. Acknowledging the contributions of others, whether through a citation or a word of gratitude, is essential.

A gleaning mentality encourages an attitude of constant curiosity, one of the surest ways to build instructional literacy in a continuous fashion. Becoming a diligent observer helps you perceive areas of mutual interest or resources inside and outside of your organization, such as a codeveloped workshop, site, or another type of shared effort. Being open to learning and incorporating as I

go—planned or unexpectedly, from anyone or in any situation—keeps me engaged and humble in the knowledge that I always have more to learn.

## Reliable documentation

One aspect of gleaning that deserves additional consideration is documentation. When you hear about a useful e-learning application or in-class exercise, be prepared to write it down, send yourself an email, create a bookmark in Zotero or a new page in Evernote—whatever it takes to keep the moment from passing. You should always give yourself the means to keep track of the useful things you run across in order to follow up on them after the fact. Effective documentation becomes increasingly possible as cloud and mobile technologies provide innovative multimodal methods for serendipitous information gathering. I used to always carry a Moleskine notebook and a pen, but I now use my iPhone to help me capture things I find useful via photo, voice, or notation.

I started consciously documenting my environment because my memory is dismal, but I quickly realized that keeping a running list of inspirations was an excellent means of bringing greater diversity into my instructional practice. I have also learned that the best insights occur when you least expect them, and often come in the form of absurdly simple solutions to lingering challenges. For example, listening to NPR's *Talk of the Nation* at the gym one day, I heard Princeton neuroscientist Sam Wang discussing intensity in speech and how this affects listener memory. Knowing that I would forget his name and everything he had said within 10 minutes, I stopped what I was doing and typed a few bits of information on the running page of book ideas on my iPhone Notes application.

**An attitude of constant curiosity and diligent observation helps build instructional literacy in a continuous fashion.**

Ideas come and go, but I have become much more productive at benefiting from them through reliable documentation. Social tools like Twitter and Facebook are perfect manifestations of this just-in-time principle; when you get in the rhythm of setting status updates and tweeting when things come to your attention, documentation has already become second nature. (Disclaimer: Make sure your gleaning methods are reliable and backed up.) Not long after making those iPhone Notes on Sam Wang's NPR interview, I accidentally put my phone through an entire washer and dryer cycle, an experience from which it never recovered. Needless to say, I was knocking wood that I had synced my information to my laptop not two days before. I now tend to use remote storage services such as Dropbox and Evernote, which save automatically to the cloud and further reduce the likelihood of information loss.

## Building communities of practice

In interviewing librarians, I heard many comments along the general themes of mentoring, observation, and collaboration. The comments underscore the basic principle that we are social learners. Our colleagues and peers provide gleaning material. They catalyze shared initiatives, reduce duplication of effort, and build the collegiality necessary to maintain productive teaching and working relationships.

An important caveat: Just as we are social learners by nature, we are also various shades of socially awkward or inept. Communities of practice in instructional development can be as affected by this as any other type of community; not everyone in a given learning group will be objective or interested in participating. It is easy to develop a negative self-concept from the wrong type of feedback. Part of belonging to a community of practice is considering the depth to which you want to engage with it and/or try to draw out its other members.

There are many approaches to peer observation, some more intense than others. You might invite a trusted co-worker to watch a face-to-face session and provide feedback limited to a specific area such as the pace of your delivery, or how learners seem to react to your instructional style. It's nerve-wracking to invite commentary, but it always serves you well in the end (either by helping you address an issue or revealing who *not* to ask next time). If you receive harsh or unhelpful feedback, console yourself with the knowledge that it likely was either offered unintentionally or as an unobvious manifestation of "why didn't I think of that?" syndrome.

Professional associations, conferences, unconferences, and continuing education programs are natural sources to build a community of practice. As the capacity to support rich communication experiences online con-

tinues to expand, many digital forums have developed that provide librarians with the means to interface with like-minded colleagues. Professional organizations such as ACRL and the Educause Learning Initiative offer frequent digital learning opportunities, while smaller in-person events such as m-Libraries and THAT-Camp provide digital resources and components, all excellent for networking and thrift. Using a combination of tools such as webcasting, blogging, tagging, chat, and threaded discussion to create hybridized or all-online learning environments, networking sites, and conferences often allows users to create personal profiles, access resources and programs, and interact with professionals who share similar interests. ALA Connect, the Association's "virtual, collaborative workspace online," provides a space not only for committee work, but for web-based learning communities and interest groups on a range of topics, and the community section of Educause provides a technology-oriented discussion platform.

## Social sites and emerging spaces

You can find viral, impromptu, and informal shared learning experiences in many social networks and emerging applications, which not only provide the space for collaboration but are low-cost and lasting channels for identifying and sharing significant content. Responsive and community-defined interactions are a hallmark of the dynamic and user-created technology movement, meaning that community elements are inherent in many of the online spaces available to learners and instructors. Blogs, wikis, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook all have potential as learning communities. Excellent group blogs that often deal with instruction include *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* and *ACRLlog*. I also turn to nonlibrary blogs for pedagogical and technological inspiration, such as *ProfHacker* for "tips about teaching, technology, and productivity." There are countless sources for information on instructional design, media, technology, and teaching effectiveness, and finding one typically leads to five others. Last but not least, email lists might seem as outdated as the movie *War Games*, but they are still an active area of professional discourse and an excellent resource for crowdsourcing solutions. Ili-1 is an active ALA list focusing on library instruction and related topics. ■

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