

Report: ACRL Institute for Information Literacy Immersion '05
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From July 29 to August 3, 2005, I participated in the Teacher Track of the ACRL Institute for Information Literacy's Immersion '05 program at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. At Immersion, I spent eight (or sometimes ten, or twelve, or more) hours a day in a series of intensive workshops on the topic of information literacy, and I also completed a project focused on reimagining my teaching in the context of what I'd learned. And I learned a great deal—I returned to North Central with not only a wealth of new ideas to try out, but also with a richer, better-informed perspective on the role of a librarian in teaching information literacy in general. More importantly, I left Immersion with the sense of being a member of a community of engaged and committed librarians who are working enthusiastically toward commonly-held goals. Immersion renewed and focused my energies, and at the same time gave me a deeper sense of purpose. Hopefully I'll be a better teacher because of it.

Philosophy of Immersion

All of Immersion's sessions were shaped by one unifying idea: that the purpose of library instruction is to help students become information literate—to be able to find, access and use information effectively and efficiently while understanding the social, legal and cultural contexts of information access and use—rather than merely to teach students how to use the library. The Immersion faculty argued that librarians fail students if we teach them only how to use a given database or reference work when instead we could be teaching them the critical thinking skills necessary for finding, evaluating and using information now and throughout their lives. Keeping this goal in mind, much of Immersion's content (at least in the Teacher Track; the program track had somewhat different aims) focused on how to become an effective teacher of information literacy. Different Immersion sessions and activities tackled this issue from different angles, ranging from the theoretical (for example: a discussion of theories about learning) to the very pragmatic (a session on how a teacher can use the voice and body to communicate effectively). The importance of student learning was consistently emphasized—the idea that good teachers do not declaim their knowledge from on high, but rather create conditions in the classroom that encourage students to learn the skills and knowledge they'll need for a lifetime. By the end of Immersion, the various theoretical and pragmatic threads of discussion throughout the program came together in the shape of a coherent philosophy of learning and teaching, centered on the idea of good teachers as passionate and dedicated creators of learning.

Teacher Track Assignment

Before arriving in St. Petersburg, all Teacher Track participants were required to submit an “instructional situation,” a detailed outline of a real-life instruction session or similar teaching situation. This outline addressed questions of teaching methods, learning theory, goals, outcomes, assessment, institutional culture, instructional technology and more. Midway through the program, we each gave a five-minute presentation based on that instructional situation to a small cohort group of fellow participants, who critiqued our presentations and offered suggestions. By the conclusion of Immersion, we all submitted new drafts of our instructional situations, describing the differences between how we previously had approached that situation and how we were likely to do so now, after incorporating the knowledge and experiences of Immersion. I found this exercise tremendously valuable; it helped me pull together much of what I'd learned at Immersion in a coherent and also fairly practical form.

Assessment as Learning

Immersion faculty member Carol Hansen conducted several Immersion sessions on the role of assessment in learning. Hansen's sessions stressed the importance of setting clear, reasonable and achievable goals based on well-thought out learning objectives in order to facilitate both student learning and the assessment of it. Hansen talked a bit about the usefulness of the ACRL's *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* for devising goals and learning objectives and for assessing learning outcomes, but cautioned that a slavish devotion to the document is most likely somewhat impractical. Hansen stressed the importance of making objectives and goals centered on learning (rather than on teaching) and on the students (rather than the teachers), and engaged Immersion participants in several hands-on activities during which we created objectives, goals and assessment instruments for a variety of instructional situations. When I sat down to revise my instructional situation, I found Hansen's sessions extremely helpful: I used what I'd learned there about objectives, goals, outcomes and assessment to reshape the content of my example instruction session into something more student- and learning-centered.

Presentation Styles and the Authentic Teacher

Though Randy Hensley's sessions stressed methods for using the voice and body to teach well, Hensley also stressed that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique. Rather, good teachers use good technique as a platform in order to achieve a state of communication or connectedness with students that will encourage student learning. Good teachers, Hensley argued (drawing on Palmer's *Courage to Teach*) in his first session, communicate a sense of "authenticity" to their students—an appearance of commitment to and passionate interest in both the subject matter being taught and in the students themselves. Hensley contended that students are better able to learn if they trust, respect and believe in the integrity of their teacher. In a later session, Hensley discussed and demonstrated methods of teaching performance—the ways in which teachers can use the voice and body to convey authenticity to their students, as well as to keep them interested and engaged. At the beginning of our first session with Hensley, he suggested that we pay close attention to how he himself teaches, and at the conclusion of our final session with him, he solicited our observations. We noted that he did, indeed, practice what he preached: all of his sessions engaged participants directly in discussion, and relied on the considerable force of his personality and his teaching performance skills in order to keep us all engaged. Part of our discussion focused on Hensley's flexibility and ability to improvise in order to meet the needs of whatever instructional situation might develop over the course of a class, and Hensley said that the secret of his success was that over the years he'd developed a "repertoire" of methods, activities, discussion points, questions, techniques, etc., that he can now deploy as needed. Hensley's sessions set a high standard for teaching performance, and undoubtedly I'll keep much of his advice in mind as I teach in the future.

Psychology of Learning

Beth Woodard's sessions on the psychology of learning encouraged Immersion participants to assess their own learning styles and theories about learning in order to become more reflective, creative and engaged teachers. Woodard offered descriptions of major theories of learning (behaviorism, cognitivism, humanism, constructivism) and advocated the usefulness of constructivist theory in helping shape librarians' approaches to student learning in the classroom. Woodard also had all Immersion participants score themselves on the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, which places test-takers into categories based on how they prefer to learn (via abstract conceptualization, concrete experience, etc.). The exercise encouraged participants to examine our own teaching styles in relationship to our learning preferences, and to consider ways in which we can accommodate the needs and desires of other kinds of learners when we teach.

Leadership

Dane Ward and Craig Gibson led a session for Teacher Track participants on leadership in the context of information literacy. The session encouraged participants to explore the implications of our own leadership styles and preferences, and to think about the culture of our respective institutions in terms of the leadership behaviors of the people in positions of authority. Also, Ward and Gibson took pains to draw distinctions between management and leadership. Drawing on James MacGregor Burns' *Leadership*, they conceived of management as "a set of processes that keeps a system running smoothly," and leadership, in contrast, as "the process of engaging with followers to achieve common goals" (quotes drawn from "Leadership for Information Literacy," presentation by Ward and Gibson at Immersion, 7-2-05).

Changing Paradigms

Ward and Gibson also led a session entitled "Changing Paradigms: From Teaching to Learning," which expanded on one of the main themes threading through the entirety of the Immersion program. Ward and Gibson contrasted the aims of the older model of "bibliographic instruction," focused on librarians teaching students how to find information in the library, with the newer model of "information literacy instruction," focused on librarians helping students learn how to become effective users of information, in the library and in their lives in general. Ward and Gibson identified this paradigm shift in librarianship as being part of a paradigm shift in education more broadly—educators are moving away from a model in which they see themselves as declaimers of knowledge from above and toward a model in which they see themselves instead as creators of environments conducive to learning and facilitators of student learning and discovery.