

LIS Pedagogy Chat is a discussion series for library and information science instructors. Our goal is to provide an informal space to ask questions and share ideas about online pedagogy, and to build a community of practice. Each session focuses on a different topic and features a short presentation on best practices followed by a facilitated discussion and a collaborative document of ideas to share. Slides and notes from each session are available in a shared folder. For more information, see <https://www.lispedagogychat.org/>

Theory or Practice: What Should We Expect from the MLS?

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Moderators: Matt Noe

Link to [Slides](#)

Presentation Notes

We've all heard the questions:

- Is the MLS necessary?
- Are we preparing people to work in the profession?
- Are we gatekeeping access to the profession?
- Are we spending too much time on theory, or practice?

What does it even mean to spend time on theory? Could mean different things in different contexts.

Have also heard comments:

- I didn't learn that in library school
- I had to learn on the job
- My MLS gave me so many transferable skills

There are competing ideas for the purpose of the MLS: often competing/ conflicting and students/early career professionals are caught in the middle.

Not always clear what the goal of the education is, and who we need to serve the most.

One challenge: we keep adding more and more responsibilities to the job-- the job itself is more than any one program could address. Nor can any profession do all the work.

Is there a shared background we expect everyone to have, shared knowledge all LIS students should have? And what about specialized areas, like medical librarians? May have to provide additional training for those specializations.

The MLS can't fully prepare people for every aspect of the profession, but can provide some grounding and foundation.

Address personal limits as an instructor by inviting in guest speakers

Difficult to determine what counts as "practical, real-life" skills to students-- and employers.

Need to address the challenges they will face in practice as well, especially in early career roles, without burning students out.

Recognizing the many courses (e.g., academic libraries) are often overviews, can't provide deep dives.

When did library employers decide that they would not train people? When did they expect that they could hire people could start everything on day one? Our job as instructors is to provide background, overview, context... not specific day-to-day skills like how to use Gobi.

Discussion

With all of the varied expectations, how do we balance and prioritize?

Melissa Wong's article in Library Trends in 2022, where is reference today? With Google finding the things we used to have to look for, what we can do to add value is determine why do we choose an art dictionary, versus architecture dictionary versus math dictionary for the word "arch"-- Google can't do that.

The field is vast and students do always understand that-- they know one slice of it, but don't know all the possibilities.

Asynchronous programs may present a challenge for soft skills. Students can't learn the instruction skills-- recording presentations isn't the same as doing it live. Academic librarians come without the instructional skills. With iSchool movement, certain topics are not "trendy"-- for example, reference. Need to reconnect to what library science means.

How do we design assignments that give students an opportunity to do "real library" work that is doable by students who have yet to work in a library?

academic Libraries Seminar for MLS students and use a poster session and "job" search as realistic and practical exercises. I agree that most students seem shocked that instruction is

“the” job for many liaison librarians — not what keeps them away from the “real” work they imagine a librarian is supposed to do.

What do MLS students think they are going to do?

Poster assignment in our core Information course during the first semester. Also, I use an evaluation assignment of space, youth services collections, programs, and websites in my Youth Services Librarianship course.

Required co-op term might help bridge the gap between the theory in library school and the practical experience that comes from working in a library.

Getting students practical experience with tools they might use. Like showing students how to use and create LibGuides, using an open source ILS like Koha for assignments, I have students do a mock grant application using a real grant of their choosing, things like that

What is the role of the students themselves to figure out what they might be doing as an academic (or other) librarians-- through professional association, job shadowing, optional presentations, etc.? Are students expecting to be “led to” these things?

Have students review professional competencies/standards and compare to what they are doing in school to see how they align.

Mock grant applications.

Have groups choose a project manager (NOT a project leader). Having one person keep track of tasks and timelines helps take a lot of work off the rest of the group so they can focus on their own work.

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Maybe we need more required classes, rather than fewer?-- Gets to the crux of whether we are trying to get all the students, regardless of career direction, to get a deep grounding in certain things? Or do we want to provide a minimum grounding and have students spend more time developing the skills employers want so they don't have to onboard?

Should we be exploring more certifications or micro-credentialing?

Does it matter who pays?

What would a BLS look like and how might it change the MLS?
Maybe a BLS sets the foundation and the MLS is more about specialization.

Resources

[Steffy, Christina. & Meg Massey.](#) "Is the MLS Necessary? Rethinking Library Science Education." *College & Research Libraries News* [Online], 85.9 (2024): 369. Web. 9 May. 2025

Melissa Wong 2022, 71:1, 36-51 in LT doi.org/10.1353/lib.2023.0003
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on how to teach "reference" today (I stretch to in AI world). article said compare when to share art dictionary, architecture dictionary, and math dictionary about defining "arch" to learn nuance of each querent's need.

I think she also suggested (or maybe I stretch to interpret): intro ref services with epistemology or philosophy of knowledge/information for timeless and inter-library-style principles

Health Sciences Librarianship:

<https://luddy.indianapolis.iu.edu/degrees/masters/mlis/health-sciences-librarianship.html>

Voices of Search "Playlist" of different library specialities:

[LibParlor Online Learning](#) - a free, openly available curriculum to support LIS students and professionals in developing research skills

[The Librarian Parlor](#) - a blog where folks share their experiences, challenges, questions, and advice for conducting research in LIS - can be a great resource for demystifying research and humanizing researchers that students might perceive as intimidating. There are also opportunities to post classifieds and build community.

<https://www.davidjameshudson.ca/considering-the-mls/>

<https://claude.ai/share/0ee52c77-bb2a-4fd7-a09d-171ebc5c51a1>