

The Quarterly Interview: Sheila Corral

iSchool, University of Pittsburgh

-Edited Transcript-

LOEX: *Where do you work? What is your job title and main responsibilities? How long have you been in this position?*

Corral: My job title is Professor and Chair, Library & Information Sciences Program at the University of Pittsburgh School of Information Sciences. I am also chair of the LIS Doctoral Studies Committee, so I am responsible for both the Masters and PhD programs in LIS. My responsibilities fall under three headings: intellectual leadership, including strategic planning, curricular reform, and program development; representation and advocacy – acting as liaison with important external constituents, such as accreditation bodies; and management and administration, which includes things like budget management, course schedules and adjunct appointments. I engage in all the activities expected of a tenured full professor, including research, teaching, and service within the University and externally.

I have been in this particular position for 18 months, but I had similar responsibilities in my previous institution in the UK, the University of Sheffield.

What would you say is your teaching philosophy?

Having spent most of my time in higher education in research-led universities, I am firmly committed to an inquiry-based pedagogy, which models the process of research in the student learning experience. The University of Sheffield's conception of IBL moves students beyond problem-based learning investigating questions defined by teachers within an existing knowledge base to exploring their own lines of inquiry and creating new knowledge.

I never set essays or “term papers” as assignments, but assign students more meaningful tasks, which require them to relate theory from the literature to real-world practice. For example, in my Academic Libraries course, they have to research an academic library role of interest (such as a subject liaison librarian, or scholarly communications librarian), then interview a practitioner working in the area, and compare the results of their interview with their findings from the literature. In my Research Methods course, they explore their personal research interests through the literature, and learn about the design and conduct of research projects by examining different examples of published studies, and developing a proposal for a small-scale research project, which we break down into a series of nine assignments over several months, building up to submission of their full proposal. *For more info about inquiry-based pedagogy, see references link at end of this article.*

What books or articles have influenced you?

1) Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university: What the student does* (4th ed.).

It is the seminal work on the principle of constructive align-

ment, and states that the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities and the assessment tasks in a program/course must be properly aligned, because the design of assessment basically defines the curriculum for students.

Biggs was a Professor at the University of Hong Kong, where constructive alignment is explicit in course documentation, such as course outlines/syllabi. I spent a sabbatical term at HKU in 2011 and had to use the institutional course outline template for the course I designed and taught there, which convinced me that I should adopt the model systematically and comprehensively.

2) Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.).

It advocates a backward design approach to course design, which is consistent with the learner-centered instructional design model used at Pitt and the Outcomes Based Approach to Student Learning (OBASL) practiced at HKU. I was particularly attracted by the UbD focus on the “big ideas” at the core of the subject as a conceptual tool or “lens” with transfer value over time.

3) Vai, M., & Sosulski, K. (2011). *Essentials of online course design: A standards-based guide*.

This is the required textbook for Teaching Online @ Pitt, an online course aimed at faculty and staff involved in developing and teaching online courses. It is a model of clarity, and consistent with the Quality Matters standards for the design of online and blended courses that we use at Pitt, which also reflect the principle of alignment between course learning objectives, module/unit learning objectives and outcomes, course assessments, instructional materials, learning activities, tools and media.

As Chair of the LIS Program, what are the one or two biggest challenges, and biggest opportunities, that you see for library schools/iSchools in the next five years?

Online education is a big challenge. The Pitt iSchool was a pioneer in this area, launching its FastTrack program as an online version of the MLIS degree in 2001. FastTrack was the first online program at Pitt and has graduated more than 400 students from 35 states. Following a review in 2012, we are now transitioning our online program to the new University-supported PittOnline platform, replacing our previous video-recorded on-campus lectures with pre-recorded lectures and other learning resources designed specifically for online students. Courses for the new MLIS PittOnline are prepared by LIS faculty with support from instructional designers and technologists from the University's Center for Instructional Development & Distance Education (CIDDE). The new process enables the professional standard of production and delivery now expected in online education, but it involves significant upfront

(Interview...Continued from page 12)

investment of instructor time, so we therefore need to think carefully about supply and demand when we choose which courses to migrate to the new system.

Regarding opportunities, iSchools, with their typically broad, multidisciplinary, strengths are particularly well equipped to prepare new professionals and experienced practitioners for hybrid roles requiring a blend of library and information science, information technology/computer science, and other domain knowledge. I advanced this argument in a paper presented at the 2010 “Academic Librarian 2: Singing in the Rain Conference Towards Future Possibilities” in Hong Kong¹, where my examples included geographic information systems specialists, data librarians, and data scientists. Pitt currently offers electives and specializations in these areas at Master’s level, and we are intending to develop more targeted offerings over the next year, including post-Master’s courses and certificates aimed at working professionals, which can be taken on campus or online.

How do you think an average academic librarian can best help graduate students be successful?

For MLIS grads, facilitating the transition to employment is the big issue. At Pitt, we are fortunate in having eight universities in the Pittsburgh area, whose libraries are really helpful in providing work experience for students (through volunteering, internships, and practica); supplying adjunct instructors, guest speakers, and case material for courses; and acting as host sites for field visits and small-scale projects.

Our alums are also very generous in giving up their time to help current students, especially by conducting mock job interviews with students as part of our regular Professional Development Days. Farther afield, one of our alums manages the New Jersey Library Association College and University Section job shadowing program, and we are now working with alums locally to set up a similar scheme in Pennsylvania.

In addition to hands-on work experience, our students also benefit from opportunities to attend professional meetings and conferences, within PA and nationally. It is nice when event organizers offer deep discounts for student registration, and even better when they offer students’ calls for proposals and awards. Overall, US conferences (including LOEX) actually seem more generous than the UK, so keep up the good work!

You came to Pittsburgh from the University of Sheffield a couple years ago. What are 2-3 similarities between how instruction is viewed in the US versus the UK? Differences?

There are significant differences in the context for instruction, the most obvious being the concept of the general education curriculum, which does not really exist in UK higher ed., so curricular integration initiatives have to target academic departments or schools, and consequently there is probably more uniformity in the visions and strategies of IL practitioners in the UK academic community.

Another big difference is in the professionalization of teaching in UK higher education. Following a government inquiry in 1997 (the Dearing Report) most UK higher education institutions require new junior faculty to participate in some form of teacher training, typically leading to a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE) accredited by the Higher Education Academy. Although librarians are not included in this requirement, many voluntarily fulfill it, and some follow through to a full Master’s qualification in education. Research by one of my Master’s students a few years ago showed that around one-third of the subject librarians surveyed had gained a formal qualifications in teaching². There is no UK equivalent of the ACRL Immersion Program, so IL practitioners generally have to choose between taking a one-day or two-day short course, or an extended program over a term or more.

A third difference is the widespread – though not universal – use of the SCONUL Seven Pillars Model in place of the ACRL IL Standards. However, apart from those contextual differences, I think many of the issues and concerns are the same, such as building librarian-faculty partnerships, and extending IL efforts into the research arena, particularly in the context of facilitating access to research datasets.

You recently co-authored a paper about “Evolving academic library specialties,” which discussed specialties, such as systems, digital, and information literacy librarians. What surprised you as you did this analysis? Do you have any concerns as these roles emerge and evolve?

The *JASIST* paper was basically a review and synthesis of ideas that Andrew Cox and I had been exploring in various projects, together and separately, for Sheffield’s MSc in Digital Library Management. My interest in blended/hybrid roles goes back to the 1990s, when the issue of the “information job family” and converged library/technology services were a hot topic in the higher ed. sector, and people were also speculating about library roles in knowledge management³. The Sheffield model of the blended professional presented in my 2010 paper in *Library Management*¹ had its origins in a paper from that decade⁴. We thought it would be useful to bring all these ideas together, and our analysis helped to confirm that professional work is indeed becoming more specialized, but demanding both depth and breadth in professional skillsets. The tech component of library jobs is now a given, though there is still an interesting question about when it makes more sense to hire a technology professional than a library professional. One interesting issue arising from a comparison of library roles in education and research is the way instructional design is recognized as a key competency for librarians, but subject expertise and technical skills are more often mentioned than research know-how for research support specialists. The key message here is all about context. Information professionals need a fuller understanding of the context of their interventions to integrate their efforts effectively into the work patterns of researchers, teachers, and learners. We need to educate LIS students to focus on user activities and workflows, rather than library functions and processes.

For a reference list, see here: <http://bit.ly/1n4r0JE>