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There's a baby in the bath water

In defense of one-shots

Library literature is full of articles critical of one-shot instruction, including a recent *College & Research Libraries* volume edited by Nicole Pagowsky. Her call for proposals makes excellent points about the ephemeral definition of the phrase "one-shot," the implications of power imbalances between librarians and professors, and the role of systemic racism and sexism in the academy.[1] I would argue that many of these same issues would arise in any type of library instruction. Embedded librarianship, train-the-trainer, credit-bearing courses, asynchronous tutorials—I've done them all, and they all have their place, but they cannot replace one-shots.

Let me be clear: I think successful one-shots need to be contextualized within a class. General orientations scheduled because the professor wants the students to be exposed to the library "for their own good"—or worse, because the professor has a conflicting appointment but doesn't want to cancel class—are almost always a waste of everyone's time. But I love teaching library workshops that are integrated into the curriculum in a meaningful way. As a librarian since 1997, I estimate I've taught at least 1,000 of them. Sometimes they are great fun, every now and then they've been difficult, but most importantly, they are an effective use of my, the faculty, and the students' time. Here are a few reasons why I believe in the one-shot:

Recognition as guest speaker. Teaching faculty are content experts and are often very protective of their class time. They do turn to guest speakers when another voice can add to the classroom conversations and knowledge. By inviting me to be a guest speaker, most faculty members are recognizing that I have expertise in valuable research skills and information literacy. Sometimes it takes discussions before the session to clarify my role with the instructor; conflict can arise when there is a mismatch in expectations. But by talking very openly about my expectations for the session, learning those of the professor, and finding common ground, we can build together an experience that meets both our needs.

Building relationships. The best library workshops I've led have been designed in collaboration with the teaching faculty member. Sometimes emailing faculty about library concerns and issues can feel like I'm sending messages into a void, with few if any replies. But after a productive library workshop, faculty members have a personal connection to me and a better understanding of my work. The response rate to my communications is much higher, and the instructors will reach out to me more frequently.

Point of need is achieved. When talking with professors, I confirm there is an assignment that requires library research skills and that the workshop is scheduled at an appropriate point

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in the semester. An assignment can provide both valuable context and incentive. Ideally, for a research paper, the students will have selected their topics but have not yet found all their sources. They are then in an appropriate headspace to think about the resources you are highlighting and to consider how they would be useful for their project. Learners are most motivated when the information being communicated will help them meet a nearing deadline!

Marketing library resources. We have literally hundreds of databases in our collection; no one can be expected to keep up with our inventory. The one-shot gives us the opportunity to point out tools that students and faculty might not know about. Google Scholar and JSTOR are fabulous resources, but if you want to find out what section of Williamsburg, Virginia, spends the most money on their pets for your advertising class, then a database like Simply Analytics is going to be invaluable.

Information literacy can be amplified. In my initial conversations with the teaching faculty member, I'm always considering which of the information literacy frames from the ACRL Framework might most apply. I incorporate aspects of at least one frame into the session, prioritizing ones that allow for discussions. Professors have often become very engaged in this section of the class, deepening their own awareness of information literacy and modeling curiosity to their students.

Practice allows for perfecting. Repetition is a common criticism of the one-shot; we often teach the same topics, such as search strategy or source evaluation, over and over. But if not carried to an extreme, the repetitive pattern can be iterative. It usually takes me two or three times to work the kinks out of a new activity. I am also an adjunct instructor for Old Dominion University's library science graduate program. When I try something new in those courses, I have to wait until the next offering a year later before making adjustments. In my one-shots, I usually can try a new tweak within a day or week. By the end of the semester, I usually have ironed out some new approaches so they are effective and efficient. Because we teach many of the same research skills, colleagues in my department often share activities with one another and help refine the activities, too.

Critiques of the one-shot are myriad, of course. Many instruction librarians experience burnout in an instruction environment where one-shots are the norm, especially when faculty are not collaborative and library administrators measure success by demanding an ever-increasing number of one-shots be delivered. The concepts of the ACRL Framework seem beyond aspirational if the one-shot is the only instructional model. There are other approaches as well, such as train-the-trainer, asynchronous modules, embedding information literacy across the curriculum, and credit-bearing courses, which some claim are superior to the one-shot.

I would argue that when it comes to faculty and administrator issues, the problem lies in organizational culture. I have participated in virtually every type of instruction model. If colleagues do not respect, appreciate, or understand the work of an instruction librarian, the problem is not with the instruction format and will affect every interaction with the faculty member. Trying to teach with unreasonable expectations is going to lead to frustration. Healthy collaboration requires both parties to benefit; if the librarian feels a power differential relative to a course instructor who demands deference, this is likely an indication of a toxic library work environment, not a problem of instruction format. White supremacy and systemic racism are also structural issues that negatively impact librarians, but again,

this is reflective of the culture and organization and is not necessarily a part of the one-shot. No matter what format you use in your teaching, you will be at a disadvantage if you are in a systemically problematic or toxic environment.

The one-shot is imperfect but they are useful. Librarians should complete an environmental scan and assess which types of library instruction are the best match for their campus. Often, a mix of different formats is needed. One-shots need to be explored, interrogated, and reframed for optimal impact, but they should not be eliminated.

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Note

1. Nicole Pagowsky, "The Contested One-Shot," *College & Research Libraries* 82, no. 3 (May 2021): 300.