

Getting Out of the Discussion Boards

The Benefits of Practical Experience

William Henley
whh1196@gmail.com



I lived in discussion boards, e-mail threads, Wix, and Google Drive for three semesters. Collection development, privacy, intellectual freedom, makerspaces, and many other topics were discussed, dissected, and debated as I pursued my graduate degree completely online. My time as a University of Kentucky grad student prepared me to be an effective school librarian on day one. I am not just saying this in hope of getting extra credit; I'm writing this in January 2017 and graduated in December 2016. The work done with my professors and peers has built the knowledge, skills, and mindsets I need to provide powerful informa-

tion-literacy learning opportunities for students and staff, to create a vibrant culture of reading in a school, and to maintain a collection that represents a diverse set of viewpoints across many formats and many lines of difference.

However, it would be naïve of me to assume that any of this would be *easy* to do on day one. As a former English teacher, I know the on-the-job learning curve for a school librarian will be as steep as it was for a classroom teacher. Before my first day of teaching, I felt mildly prepared. My feeling of preparedness quickly turned into an overwhelm-

ing feeling of unabated terror when my block one students walked in for the first time. These students' English instruction was solely on my shoulders. I truly believe that no school of education or alternative route program and no amount of student teaching or portfolio-assembling could have prevented that feeling.

My first day of teaching was over six years ago, but that feeling of responsibility and subsequent terror has been omnipresent in the back of my mind. As a graduate student, I wanted to do everything in my power to mitigate the first-day terror of school librarianship. I knew this meant I needed to get as much practical experience as possible. I worked with practicing school librarians and teachers on assignments as often as possible. I completed my school library practicum at a school that aligned with my personal beliefs and professional goals. I substituted for school librarians, and I was a long-term substitute for a high school library assistant. I also interned in a public library, an experience which, despite how much I enjoyed and learned, showed me that I had made the right decision in pursuing school librarianship.

These experiences have added layers of invaluable context to what I gained from my courses. A lively conversation on a discussion board about privacy was informative. However, physically holding an overdue notice that is about to be sent to the parents of a high school junior who has not returned books on safe sex and teenage pregnancy is enlightening in an entirely different way.



These experiences have added layers of invaluable context to what I gained from my courses. A lively conversation on a discussion board about privacy was informative. However, physically holding an overdue notice that is about to be sent to the parents of a high school junior who has not returned books on safe sex and teenage pregnancy is enlightening in an entirely different way. Writing a report on censorship was difficult. However, convincing a teacher to put *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* on a summer reading list after the teacher has said, “The parents won’t go for the gay characters,” is another level of challenging. These practical experiences forced me to grapple with the real-world implications of theories, concepts, and ethics that float around the academic ether.

While those two experiences are the most memorable, my time outside of the discussion boards was filled with instances that both shaped my beliefs and illuminated realities about libraries and the services they provide. In my graduate courses we discussed overdue fines as a barrier to access. I left those readings and discussions with the belief that overdue fines were a barrier, and that a patron should be charged only if an item was lost or damaged beyond repair. My long-term substitute position as a library assistant was in an affluent suburban high school that has a student parking lot filled with BMW and Mercedes vehicles. It was in a district that charges high school students a nickel a day for overdue items and a flat fee for lost/damaged items. Even though virtually every student could afford to pay fines, I quickly realized that hassling a student over fifteen cents discouraged them from checking out books and even from visiting the library. In my courses, it never occurred to me that a lost fine might not be enough to replace an item, but I

quickly found out that the flat fee rarely covered the replacement cost of an item. Neither type of fine was a legitimate source of revenue, and they both deterred students from using the library and its collection. I left that experience with a strengthened belief in fines as a barrier, and, in case I ever work in a school that charges fines, I also learned how quick and easy it is to cancel fines in the integrated library system.

One of the major reasons I decided to become a school librarian is to provide students with a diverse collection that allows them to explore their own multifaceted identities and to promote acceptance and empathy about aspects of identity that are different from their own. I learned how important this exploration is during my first year of teaching in the Mississippi Delta when we were reading *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* by Ishmael Beah. One of my students, an avid reader, raised her hand and commented that this was the first book she had read that featured a person of color as the protagonist. My students were in the ninth grade, and all but one were African American. That single moment was the gut check my white male privilege needed, and it set me on the professional path I am on today.

Five years after that moment, I was enrolled in a school library administration course. We were completing a collection-development project. I partnered with an elementary school librarian and decided to focus on the biography collection because I quickly noticed a dearth of titles about people of color. I developed a lengthy list of possible texts to add to the collection. I justified these additions by citing academic research and the school’s racial/ethnic demographics, by aligning the titles to state standards, and by linking the titles to projects and units the

teachers were already leading at that school. I felt like I was acing collection development. Then I asked the librarian how much money she could realistically spend on biographies. Given the many other needs of the collection, \$500 was the most she could justify. When I added up the total cost of the titles on my list, I was shocked. As ridiculous as this is going to sound, at that moment I realized how expensive nonfiction titles are. I whittled the list down to eighteen items, and I was still thirteen dollars over.

At this point, I truly realized how budget constraints make collection development a tightrope walk. If I had purchased every biography on my original list, there would have been no money left over for the new *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* book or for revamping the worn-out 612.8 section for the kindergarten’s annual five senses unit. While budgets were something that we covered in my courses, they seemed to exist far away from the cozy utopian bubble of graduate school. My work with the elementary school librarian popped that bubble, and my time in other schools and libraries showed me that many school librarians would be ecstatic to have \$500 to spend on one section.

But what does this mean for you? If you are a library science student, online or on campus, get out of the lecture hall or discussion board and into a library as often as possible. If you are a full-time teacher who is also pursuing a degree in library science, collaborate with your school librarian early and often to create units and projects for your class that you can use with your students. All of this can be as formal as your practicum or as informal as shelving books in a school library. Take what you learned in the bubble to the real world. Reconcile the differences between academia and practice by



One of my students, an avid reader, raised her hand and commented that this was the first book she had read that featured a person of color as the protagonist. My students were in the ninth grade, and all but one were African American. That single moment was the gut check my white male privilege needed, and it set me on the professional path I am on today.

asking as many questions about what you are learning in your courses as possible. I have yet to meet a librarian who did not love talking about libraries, and their actual lived experiences have led to nuanced opinions and points I often did not see in my courses.

If you are a library science professor, design more assignments that encourage your students to partner with a practicing librarian or teacher. The assignments on which I worked with a librarian or teacher were by far the most impactful and memorable. I also feel more prepared to collaborate with stakeholders in the future because these assignments provided a low-stakes situation in which I could practice fostering relationships with other professionals.

And most importantly, if you are a practicing school librarian, I would encourage you to open your space

and collection to library science students. You are in the trenches and have a breadth of experience and insight that comes only from running a program. If you live near a library science program, reach out to the university about hosting practicum students and inquire about creating a volunteer opportunity with their student organizations. If you do not live near a program, contact your alma mater and say you are willing to partner with students on assignments that allow for virtual collaboration. This action is not purely altruistic. The library science student might create a unit plan you can use. When I visited libraries, I was often convinced to stay a few minutes extra and do some shelving. Who doesn't want a volunteer who already knows Dewey?

That morning in August when students walk into the school library for the first time is fast approaching.

However, I know that my courses have taught me well, and, just as importantly, my practical experience has given me a concrete foundation to meet many different challenges. Day one as a librarian is going to be scary. It is not going to be terrifying.



William Henley

recently graduated with an MS in library science from the University of Kentucky.

He taught for five years and

is a proud 2010 Mississippi Delta corps member with Teach for America. While in graduate school, he completed an internship at the Homer Public Library through the Alaska State Library, and he completed his school library practicum at the International School of Ulaanbaatar (ISU) in Mongolia. In August he is moving to Mongolia to become the teacher librarian at ISU. You can follow his adventures in school librarianship on Twitter @Lanky_Librarian.