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## Librarians in the Lead: A Case for Interdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration on Assignment Design

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### Abstract

Assignment design provides a potential niche for librarians to fill in improving research assignments and in providing opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration on teaching, but this can be difficult work to claim as librarians. In the 2016-2017 academic year, a team of three librarians at Utah State University, a mid-size research university, piloted an assignment design workshop for faculty. Based on a model developed by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA), our workshop's core component was a structured, librarian-facilitated small group discussion among three to four faculty members from a range of academic departments. Interdisciplinary conversation about teaching research skills thrived in these discussions (called "charrettes"), with librarians uniquely positioned to encourage knowledge sharing in service of student learning and success. This article presents three iterations of our workshops as a case study in information literacy intervention outside traditional classroom instruction sessions, extending and redefining the role of the academic librarian as a partner in teaching and learning.

*Keywords:* assignment design; faculty collaboration; information literacy

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# Librarians in the Lead: A Case for Interdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration on Assignment Design

## Introduction

As they collaborate with faculty, teaching librarians often recognize their potential to impact the design of student research assignments. Librarians, as Simmons (2005) has argued, serve as “disciplinary discourse mediators,” working in the “in-between[s]” where students encounter disciplinary conventions and faculty expectations—and where faculty encounter student understandings and competencies (p. 305). This mediating role extends to research practices that transcend discipline, as librarians help students break down the taken-for-granted steps required to achieve a final assignment deliverable (for example, finding, selecting, and parsing a scholarly article for an annotated bibliography). Coaching students through research challenges at their points of need, librarians have a valuable midstream perspective on where students struggle with assignment navigation and research skill development. Faculty may lack this perspective if learning assessments are limited to papers and projects turned in at the end of the term.

Utah State University has a strong, integrated information literacy program in most programs and departments. While library instruction is still an important component of our work, promoting collaboration and sharing our expertise in building innovative, authentic research opportunities for students can extend our impact and make our library instruction even more effective. As teaching librarians, we understand the iterative nature of assignment design work, the varied disciplinary definitions of research, and the ways we can help mediate between teachers and learners.

Finding practical, effective ways to increase librarian involvement in research assignment design, however, can be challenging. Given competing demands for librarians’ time and efforts, a major issue is scalability. Especially for those librarians liaising with large departments for subject instruction, carrying a heavy instructional load themselves, or combining liaison duties with a primary role in another area of the library, in-depth involvement in assignment design for numerous courses is simply not feasible. A second issue is one of expertise. As academic librarians have a range of training in teaching, let alone in assignment design, claiming a role in this area may feel uncomfortable to some. Centers for Teaching Excellence and other units on campus may also already provide faculty support in terms of syllabus and assignment development. However, librarians do have a

unique understanding of research as a process and, as relationship-builders on campus, are prime facilitators of conversations about this process as foundational to successful teaching and learning.

Positioning librarians as conveners of a learning community is one approach to sustainably engaging their skills in mediating between teachers and learners on campus. Driven by the overarching goal of creating more engaging and innovative ways for students to learn research skills, a team of teaching librarians at Utah State University offered assignment design workshops for faculty once a semester from fall 2016 to fall 2017.<sup>1</sup> Our three workshops brought together an interdisciplinary group of faculty members to foster both the faculty-librarian collaborations that have been linked to greater student success (Booth et al., 2015) as well as faculty-faculty dialogues about teaching. This dialogue filled a gap on campus and extended our information literacy efforts beyond traditional classroom and online instruction, representing a successful approach to bringing librarians to the assignment design table in a new way.

In our workshops, collaboration and dialogue took place through a structured feedback process called a charrette, a term used in architecture and other design disciplines to denote an intense period of collaborative design work (“Charet,” n.d.). The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) has led the way in employing charrette structures and principles in the context of assignment design. In support of their mission of promoting meaningful assessment in higher education, NILOA’s resources include professional development opportunities for educators, an online toolkit for bringing assignment design work to campuses, and an open-access repository for peer-reviewed assignments tied to the organization’s Degree Qualifications Profile. In 2014, two Utah State University librarians participated in a half-day NILOA assignment design charrette, giving and receiving feedback on research assignments in a small group of faculty. Both librarians came away from the experience sharing NILOA’s belief that “assignments can be a focus for powerful professional development” (Hutchings, Jankowski, & Schultz, 2016, p. 11). However, as the only librarians among the day’s participants, they also realized the particular potential for librarians to contribute to and facilitate this interdisciplinary professional development among faculty.

This article explores how we applied NILOA materials and concepts—along with our own knowledge about student learning and expertise in information literacy—to create a new venue for faculty reflection, collaboration, and assignment revision on our campus.

## Background: Faculty-librarian collaboration

Like many educators, teaching librarians recognize the role assignments play in student learning. Hutchings, Jankowski, and Ewell (2014) emphasized that assignments are “not only a source of rich evidence about student learning, they are also pedagogically powerful—sending signals to students about what faculty think matters, and about what they expect from students” (p. 7). Librarian input on assignments can signal our expertise and awareness of what matters in research opportunities for students. Along with other faculty, we can provide helpful outside perspectives to assignment authors, who may not be aware of the messages they send about their expectations or about students’ preparation to meet those expectations.

Librarians have long been interested in how to build trust and collaborative opportunities with faculty, including recognizing factors that inhibit these relationships. Christiansen, Stompler, and Thaxton (2004) identified a disconnection between faculty and librarians and developed two frameworks to help explain it, considering both the organizational and social status dimensions. They noted the amount of time that librarians dedicate to studying faculty perceptions, but for faculty, “librarian-faculty relations are of little or no concern” (p. 120). While some faculty collaborate deeply with librarians, shifting our roles to encompass providing input on assignments can be somewhat fraught. Factors that contribute to hindering these partnerships include organizational culture, available resources (e.g., time and motivation), and understanding of other disciplines (Franklin, 2013, p. 181). Pagowsky and DeFrain (2014) pointed to the influence of perceptions of librarians, arguing that “in working with faculty and students we need to take control of the fact that how we are perceived influences the work we do, and the work we do influences how we are perceived” (“Can we be both?” para. 5). Other factors that influence library and faculty partnerships include campus culture, which may relate to issues of librarian status in academia (Schwartz, 2015). A 2015 survey conducted by *Library Journal* and Gale found that both faculty and librarians agree that information literacy is the “most essential service provided by academic librarians” (p. 3). While librarians and faculty may agree on the importance of IL and librarians’ roles in it, it is difficult for many librarians to get buy-in and have influence at the curricular and assignment level. Lampert (2007) posed three modes of instruction for librarians involved in curriculum development: reactive, interactive, and proactive (p. 99). Proactive librarians are able to drive and develop learning opportunities that support the existing curriculum (p. 99). For librarians interested in adopting a proactive model—which includes helping identify and build research opportunities in courses through assignment

co-development—those collaborations can be difficult to develop. Many faculty do not perceive librarians as partners in teaching and learning, especially to the degree of involvement at the assignment design level; librarians have more to do in demonstrating their value in this area.

Other academic libraries have contributed toward faculty development and librarian involvement in assignment design, often through workshops with a significant instructional component. Chapman and White (2001) discussed their efforts in offering workshops, providing tips and guidance for developing assignments as well as some discussion of assignments that the participants brought with them. Their workshops began with a lecture-style format but transitioned in subsequent workshops to become increasingly more interactive based on participant feedback. Their work relied largely on Mosley (1998) who, in partnership with her institution's Center for Teaching Excellence, offered interactive workshops that had participants engage in exercises that introduced them to the basics of effective assignment design.

Our workshop approach centers dialogue, facilitating intensive peer review by both faculty and librarians. From an information literacy perspective, the charrette model allows for feedback from librarians to be offered and received in a different light—as coming from pedagogically reflective peers in a format other than the traditional pre-semester subject librarian instruction request. In our workshops, we drew on two frameworks that underpin our instruction program and were able to share these approaches to assignment design with our faculty participants. The first is Wiggins and McTighe's Backward Design (1998), which emphasizes the importance of identifying desired learning results first, determining what evidence might demonstrate those results, and only then designing experiences and activities that provide students the opportunities to demonstrate proficiency. The second is the Decoding the Disciplines cycle, which provides a step-by-step framework for breaking down tasks that faculty (disciplinary experts) assume students already know how to do in service of a more scaffolded approach to the design of learning experiences (Pace & Middendorf, 2004; Pace, 2017). This ties to the importance of helping novices through tasks that might be implicit in expectations but not explicitly defined or modeled for students (Simmons, 2005; Elmborg, 2003).

The charrette model also provides an important opportunity for interdisciplinary faculty to collaborate on the work of teaching and learning. While many universities (including our institution) are invested in supporting faculty, structured opportunities to join a community of interdisciplinary faculty for direct feedback on one's work as an educator are not always

available.<sup>2</sup> Learning communities for faculty have demonstrated increases in teacher self-efficacy, as well as a belief among participants that their involvement positively affects students (Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates, & Marc, 2013). Our workshops constituted a new type of interdisciplinary faculty learning community at our institution, thus demonstrating that our library values such communities and is well-positioned to foster them (Belwzowski, Ladwig, & Miller 2013; DeLathouwer, Martin, & Lisaka, 2012; Leadley, 1998). The charrette model showcases librarians as natural facilitators of this work, bringing them to the assignment design table to establish stronger connections with and among faculty in service of deeper learning opportunities for students. By redefining the way we seek to improve student learning and research opportunities, we are able to get closer to that “collaboration ‘sweet spot’” where librarians have a role in assignment design and provide strategic library instruction sessions when appropriate (Junisbai, Lowe, & Tagge, 2016, p. 608).

## The first workshop

Each of the three workshops we organized required faculty to submit an assignment prior to the event; for the first two, this was a research assignment, but for the third, a research component was not required (discussed further below). Faculty used a set of guiding questions to review the assignments of two to three peers. Rounds of discussion-based peer feedback (the charrette) then allowed deeper exploration of each assignment’s design and areas for potential improvement. One assignment was discussed per round, with each round consisting of five minutes of introduction by the assignment author, 15 minutes of verbal feedback by peers, and five minutes of written summary by all participants. Librarians both facilitated the charrettes (keeping time and managing discussion) and gave comments to assignment authors.

### Participation

We sought internal support to build initial buy-in from faculty and incentivize their participation in our first assignment design workshop. A pilot program from the University Provost offered Curriculum Innovation grants to support new curricular



interventions promoting student success. Our proposal requested funding to compensate 24

faculty for attending a full-day assignment design workshop with some follow-up commitments (see Table 1). These obligations included submitting a research assignment and a summary description of its course context prior to the workshop, revising the assignment based on the feedback received during the event, implementing the revised assignment, and completing a 30- to 60-minute interview about their experience and its perceived impact on their teaching and students' learning. As a part of this cohort study, we also collected a sample of student work to represent performance on the revised research assignments. The grant allowed us to compensate each faculty participant \$500.00 for their work as well as cover the travel costs of six faculty from our regional campuses and provide food for the event.

**Table 1: Participant obligations**

| Workshop 1<br>December 2016, 10am-4pm<br>24 Faculty Participants | Workshop 2<br>April 2017, 2pm-4:30pm<br>21 Faculty Participants | Workshop 3<br>December 2017, 1:00pm-4:30pm<br>16 Faculty Participants  |
|--|---|--|
| Submit assignment in advance                                     | Submit assignment in advance                                    |  |
| Review peers' assignments during workshop                        | Review peers' assignments in advance                            | Review peers' assignments during workshop  |
| Attend workshop  | Attend workshop   | Attend workshop  |
| Revise and implement assignment                                  |   |  |
| Complete interview with researchers                              |   |  |
| Share student work (with consent)                                |   |  |
| Receive compensation (\$500)                                     | Receive compensation (\$250)                                    | No compensation, but opportunity to earn a digital teaching badge and documentation for tenure and promotion |

We successfully recruited a full cohort through marketing via the library website and subject librarian emails to departments, seeking a broad range of faculty and assignments that would include a range of teaching experience, topics, and disciplines. We used a simple Qualtrics form for submissions of interest, gathering information about each faculty applicant, the course connected to the assignment they hoped to revise, and a brief statement of why the workshop opportunity would be beneficial to them. We were able to accept everyone who applied. Two weeks prior to the workshop, faculty emailed us their assignments and a completed template with details about the assignment context (see Appendix A). These details allowed us to create charrette groupings that were



interdisciplinary by design and took faculty rank and teaching experience levels into consideration. Our participants represented a range of colleges and departments (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Participation Rates for All Three Workshops across Colleges & Departments**

| College                             | Department                               | Number |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------|
| Humanities & Social Sciences<br>36% | History                                  | 4      |
|                                     | English                                  | 7      |
|                                     | Sociology, Social Work & Anthropology    | 10     |
|                                     | Journalism & Communication               | 1      |
| Art<br>5%                           | Art History                              | 1      |
|                                     | Music                                    | 2      |
| Science 7%                          | Biology                                  | 4      |
| Business<br>3%                      | Management Information Systems           | 1      |
|                                     | Management                               | 1      |
| Education & Human Services<br>34%   | Teacher Education                        | 1      |
|                                     | Special Ed & Rehab                       | 5      |
|                                     | Kinesiology & Health Science             | 6      |
|                                     | Family, Consumer & Human Development     | 5      |
|                                     | Psychology                               | 3      |
|                                     | Communicative Disorders & Deaf Education | 1      |
| Agriculture & Applied Science<br>7% | Family & Consumer Science Education      | 1      |
|                                     | Applied Science & Technology Education   | 1      |
|                                     | Nutrition, Dietetics, and Food Science   | 1      |
|                                     | Plant, Soils & Climate                   | 1      |
| Engineering<br>5%                   | Engineering Education                    | 2      |
|                                     | Civil and Environmental Engineering      | 1      |
| Natural Resources 1.5%              | Environmental Science & Society          | 1      |
| Other 1.5%                          | Academic Resource Center                 | 1      |
| Total                               |  | 61     |

### Workshop structure

We held the first workshop in early December 2016 on the Friday before finals week. In scheduling, we hoped to catch faculty in the relative calm before the storm of grading and at a time they were planning for the next semester's courses. The workshop was a full-day commitment for participants (see Appendix B).

The day began with a presentation from the University's Undergraduate Research program discussing undergraduate research as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). The intention was

to frame assignment design revision as an opportunity to contribute to students' cumulative learning by integrating more opportunities for student research. We then gave an overview of the Decoding the Disciplines model as both a tool for reflection and revision, encouraging faculty to focus first on moments of student struggle ("bottlenecks") and then leveraging Backward Design principles to address the implicit challenges represented by those bottlenecks.<sup>3</sup> Following the instructional portion of the day, each faculty participant had an hour to read and review three peers' assignments using a common set of guiding questions based on NILOA's materials (see Appendix C). During the lunch that followed, faculty were placed in groups by broad discipline and had the chance to meet with their subject librarian and network with other colleagues.

The afternoon portion of the workshop was devoted to the actual charrette. After we introduced the structure, each interdisciplinary group moved to a different space in the library for their conversation. During the charrette, one librarian was assigned to each group to both facilitate and provide feedback. Following the charrette, faculty and librarians assembled back in the original meeting space for a large-group discussion and an individual feedback survey. Faculty revised and implemented their research assignments over the subsequent semesters, completing an interview with a member of the research team after doing so.

#### Feedback and reflections

We gained valuable insight from our workshop discussions and observations, survey of participants, and follow-up interviews with members of this first faculty cohort. Overall, the experience of the first workshop was positive for those involved and affirmed our desire to organize another. In the debrief conversation at the end of the event, several faculty commented on the vulnerability they felt initially, but ultimately expressed appreciation for the feedback they received as a result of embracing this vulnerability. Several faculty members commented on appreciating the opportunity to focus on assignment design in a "safe space." Two librarians who served as roving observers during the day noted the common challenges many faculty experience in their classes, such as adapting instruction to different contexts (e.g., online or broadcast format, high enrollment classes, etc.) and student challenges in evaluating and citing sources. Faculty also addressed the need to be more explicit and transparent in assignments, reflecting that it is important to highlight the "why" behind assignment requirements and the need to sometimes "sell" the assignment. As one faculty member commented, "What we do is obvious to us, but not always obvious to our students."

Our post-workshop survey acknowledged that faculty found value in the feedback they both gave and received during the event. The first half of the survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with a series of statements on a five-point scale. The results indicate faculty felt engaged with their charrette group peers, including the librarian facilitators (see Tables 3 and 4, respectively, for faculty and librarian survey results). The second half of the survey asked for responses to open-ended questions about the most and least useful parts of the workshop and about the experience of being a participant. One librarian praised the charrette for offering a “close-up look [at] how faculty think through assignments” and a chance to “see faculty collaborating across disciplines.” Several faculty specifically praised the interdisciplinary nature of the charrette as its most useful aspect: “Hearing about the great ideas and methods my colleagues across disciplines are using” and “Getting the feedback of people who have similar experiences with assignments—they’ve tried some of the things I’ve wondered about!”

**Table 3: Workshop 1 Faculty Survey Feedback (24 Faculty)**

| Statement   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------------------------|
| I received useful feedback on my assignment today.                              | 67%            | 33%   | -                          |
| I gave useful feedback on a faculty research assignment today.                  | 38%            | 63%   | -                          |
| My feedback was valued by other faculty.  | 25%            | 75%   | -                          |
| I think librarians can be valuable collaborators in research assignment design. | 83%            | 17%   | -                          |
| I feel motivated to implement changes in my teaching after this workshop.       | 75%            | 25%   | -                          |

*Note.* All survey questions were scored on a 5-point scale but only the answers that received responses are reported.

**Table 4: Workshop 1 Librarian Survey Feedback (6 Librarians)**

| Statement   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------------------------|
| I gave useful feedback on a faculty research assignment today.                          | 33%            | 67%   | -                          |
| My feedback was valued by other faculty.  | 33%            | 67%   | -                          |
| I think librarians can be valuable collaborators in research assignment design.         | 83%            | 17%   | -                          |
| I have a better understanding of how my faculty think about research assignment design. | 67%            | 17%   | 17%                        |
| I feel more connected to the research and teaching going on in my department(s).        | 50%            | 50%   | -                          |

These core themes—the value of interdisciplinarity and the value of peer feedback—still resonated in post-implementation faculty interviews (some of which were conducted a year after the charrette experience itself), indicating their centrality. In the words of one participant, expanding beyond departmental and disciplinary spaces was helpful because when “you’re in the forest, you can’t see the trees.” This “outsider” perspective was especially useful when it came to disciplinary language. Two faculty members independently described feelings of being “so much in your head in your own discipline” and “stuck inside our own jargon and our own field.” A check on the tendency to “over jargonize” was especially important in general education courses, where students come from a range of backgrounds:

[W]e were put up in those groups where there were so many different perspectives—I think I had a biologist, a sociologist, maybe an education person. And for me because I’m teaching this class in a large survey, that was really helpful, because that sort of represented the types of students that I have. So listening to what they understood about the project and what objectives they saw helped me, number one, to reframe what it is that I want students to get out of this project.

A handful of participants expressed a desire for more feedback from faculty in their fields or at least in related disciplines, though these comments were few and the benefits of interdisciplinary groups did seem to outweigh any challenges for the majority. The overall consensus among charrette participants was that the opportunity to receive peer feedback was valuable and impacted their thinking about assignment design. As one participant put it, “to have three or four people thinking really hard about your assignment was good.” Tackling pedagogical challenges as a group helped spark new ideas and reframe sticking

points. Reflecting on the charrette experience, a faculty member noted “I think it’s more challenging for me to try to problem solve on my own because I see things and my experience is so much more narrow. Even if I try to broaden it, I just don’t have the background that other people in that group had to have new eyes on it.” A future article will discuss other themes and implications for teaching, learning, and library collaboration emerging from these post-charrette interviews (Wishkoski, Lundstrom, & Davis, 2019).

## The second workshop

Feedback and observations from the first workshop prompted practical changes to subsequent workshops. From a facilitation perspective, some faculty voices overwhelmed the small charrette groups at times, and some assignment creators responded too much during their round (perhaps out of defensiveness to their peers’ constructive feedback). In facilitator training for the next charrettes, we emphasized strategies for eliciting participation from all group members, encouraged facilitators to open conversation with an assessment of assignment strengths, and suggested more frequent reminders of the charrette’s time constraints to keep assignment creators on track. Other changes had to do with the structure of the day. Faculty found the morning portion of the first workshop the least useful and asked for the instructional content (the Decoding the Disciplines information) to be distributed as a handout prior to the session. One faculty member suggested advance distribution of assignments to avoid “so much time in the morning devoted to reading files.” We took note of feedback that the full-day workshop was a substantial time commitment, and that shortening the agenda by “flipping” assignment review and minimizing introductory material would be beneficial.

We held our second workshop at the end of April 2017 on the Friday before finals week in a condensed afternoon (half-day) format. Remaining grant funds allowed us to provide our second cohort of 21 participants with \$250 stipends for their work. These faculty participants were required to submit their research assignment in advance, review two peers’ research assignments prior to the workshop, and attend the event (with travel covered for any regional campus faculty), but had no post-workshop obligations (see Table 1). In terms of marketing, we used the same channels of the library website and subject librarian outreach, but for this workshop we also encouraged our first cohort to promote the event among colleagues and extended personal invitations to faculty who had expressed interest in the first workshop but were not able to attend.

The streamlined agenda for our second workshop meant that we spent less time on instruction but did still share key assignment design principles with participants (see Appendix B). We pointed faculty to a LibGuide for details of the Decoding the Disciplines cycle and materials from NILOA, and spent only a few minutes presenting five major takeaways distilled from the first workshop experience:

- Reflect on where students get stuck. Identifying “bottlenecks” in assignments and research process is an essential first step in changing learners’ experiences.
- Make the implicit explicit. After uncovering the unspoken skills, requirements, and expectations for success, how might these be clarified for students?
- Scaffold the research process. How can opportunities for learning be designed to lead students toward their final deliverable in a more structured way? Thinking across the curriculum, have students ever been taught the implicit skills that are assumed by the assignment? If not, where is there room for scaffolds?
- Offer formative assessment and opportunities for peer learning. Make sure students get feedback along the way, and remember structured peer feedback can be a powerful way of achieving that.
- Consider a different end product than the standard research paper. Authentic research products mirror what practitioners in a field produce, such as educational materials, business plans, exhibits, media, or grant applications. In light of the idea of “renewable” assignments (Wiley, 2016), counter to traditional “disposable” assessments, could student work reach an audience beyond the course instructor or teaching assistant?

In addition to modifying our presentation content, we also shortened the charrette itself to three rounds. The one fewer faculty member per group reduced the amount of peer feedback each assignment author received, but allowed us to decrease the length of day and participants’ pre-workshop workload. Librarian facilitators reviewed all three assignments in their charrette groups. With the first workshop in mind, we explicitly acknowledged that some participants might feel vulnerable and anxious about sharing their work when introducing the charrette structure. We framed the charrette process as non-combative, non-defensive, and supportive, and emphasized the librarian facilitator’s role in maintaining that environment in each group. The positive feedback from faculty participants affirmed that these changes were well received (see Table 5).

**Table 5: Workshop 2 Faculty Survey Feedback (21 Faculty)**

| Statement   | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|----------------------------|----------|
| I received useful feedback on my assignment today.                              | 86%            | 14%   | -                          | -        |
| I gave useful feedback on a faculty research assignment today.                  | 52%            | 43%   | -                          | 5%       |
| My feedback was valued by other faculty.  | 62%            | 33%   | 5%                         | -        |
| I think librarians can be valuable collaborators in research assignment design. | 86%            | 14%   | -                          | -        |
| I feel motivated to implement changes in my teaching after this workshop.       | 95%            | 5%    | -                          | -        |

### Third Workshop

Our third workshop was held without grant funding and had no expenses other than the cost of refreshments. Shifting toward this more sustainable model required us to rethink what was asked of faculty participants and consider additional ways to incentivize participation while minimizing attrition. Keeping the workshop to an afternoon, requiring faculty to review only two assignments, and building time into the event for that review allowed us to avoid requiring pre- or post-work while retaining time for charrette discussion (see Appendix B).

We expanded on previous marketing efforts by affiliating with the university's Empowering Teaching Excellence (ETE) program, run through the Academic and Instructional Services (AIS) department.<sup>4</sup> We promoted our event through their social media and a faculty-wide email from the Vice President of AIS. Though we did not pay participants for their time, we did provide additional perks for their involvement. These included an ETE "Contribute" badge (the highest level in ETE's digital badging program), a letter to supervisors or tenure and promotion committee chairs summarizing participant involvement in the workshop, tips for documenting participation in annual review materials, and information about submitting revised assignments to the NILOA repository as a way of demonstrating commitment to open pedagogy. Given the lack of compensation, we were happy to have a

total of 16 faculty attend. Two others who initially signed up either dropped out right before the workshop or simply did not show up. However, we were pleased with the turnout and felt that earlier marketing could yield better results for future uncompensated workshops.

We made two other major changes to our third workshop. First, in an effort to be more inclusive and attract a wider audience, we allowed faculty to bring non-research assignments; six of the sixteen assignments did not include research components, and these non-research assignments were placed in their own charrette groups. Examples of such assignments included a portfolio on local social welfare government agencies, a folklore collection project, and a psychology assignment on behavior modification that required students to design a program and collect baseline data on it. Though some of our librarian facilitators initially expressed concern about giving feedback on non-research assignments fearing they would lack expertise in this area, it seemed to work fine in practice.

Second, we partnered with instructional designers from USU's Center for Innovative Design and Instruction, also affiliated with the AIS department. Each small charrette group consisted of a librarian, an instructional designer, and three interdisciplinary faculty, and post-workshop survey results showed that faculty found it valuable to have both librarians and instructional designers involved in giving feedback on their work (see Table 6). Other survey feedback showed a general drop in the "strongly agree" category across the board (especially in comparison to the second workshop). A contributing factor could have been integrating assignment review into the workshop itself; a few comments from participants indicated that this review time felt rushed (as opposed to the self-paced review by faculty in previous charrettes), and this may have had an impact on the quality of the feedback given.



**Table 6: Workshop 3 Faculty Survey Feedback (16 Faculty)**

| Statement  | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither Agree nor Disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|----------------------------|
| I received useful feedback on my assignment today.   | 50%            | 44%   | 6%                         |
| I gave useful feedback on a faculty research assignment today.                             | 33%            | 61%   | 6%                         |
| My feedback was valued by other faculty.   | 44%            | 50%   | 6%                         |
| I think <i>librarians</i> can be valuable collaborators in research assignment design.     | 100%           | -     | -                          |
| I think <i>instructional designers</i> can be valuable collaborators in assignment design. | 83%            | 17%   | -                          |
| I feel motivated to implement changes in my teaching after this workshop.                  | 67%            | 33%   | -                          |

## Significance

Reflecting on our three charrette experiences, several themes emerged in terms of the significance of collaborative assignment design work.

A space for growth through peer feedback. The charrette structure provided an organized way to make visible the often-private work of (research) assignment design. As we heard from participants, such opportunities for peer feedback are not commonplace. In the tenure-and-promotion-driven climate of academia, there is perhaps a perceived risk in sharing; faculty open themselves to critique by making a normally private process public. The interdisciplinary and librarian-facilitated nature of the charrette, however, made this vulnerability productive. One of the assignment design principles we encouraged faculty to keep in mind was making implicit tasks (those tacit knowledge practices required to research in a discipline) explicit for their students (Simmons, 2005; Elmborg, 2003). By asking participants to share work in progress, we made faculty members' own implicit pedagogical processes more explicit—and thus more available for reflection and revision.

A reminder of the student experience. As experts in a field of inquiry, faculty benefit from an outsider view of research assignments that will be encountered by students not yet fully fluent in disciplinary conventions (Simmons, 2005; Elmborg, 2003). Checking assumptions against a group of interdisciplinary colleagues can help faculty in “the process of negotiating between the knowledge community of the discipline and novices who want to join that community” (Elmborg, 2003, pp. 73-74). Charrette feedback becomes an opportunity to expose common misunderstandings about the value and purpose of disciplinary epistemologies and methodologies, in addition to clarifying disciplinary language and scaffolding research tasks to meet a range of skill levels.

An opportunity to discuss common challenges. Several faculty reported their major takeaway from the charrette experience was realizing that many of the challenges of teaching and learning research skills transcend discipline. Rather than “struggling alone,” as one faculty member put it, participants gleaned “ways to teach skills that students will understand and be able to transfer to their other research courses” as well. Interdisciplinarity in this context does not imply disregarding or minimizing disciplinary expertise. Rather, this expertise is leveraged to adapt ideas to disciplinary contexts in ways that give novices an entry point. Charrette participants appreciated getting ideas to “steal” and reshape, both in terms of assignment design and teaching strategies in general. In her follow-up interview, one faculty member explained that the experience allowed her to “sort of be a student for a little bit again and work collaboratively with others.”

A motivation boost. A day or afternoon dedicated to in-depth reflection on one course and assignment helped faculty prioritize in-depth assignment work among the competing tasks they juggle. As one participant explained:

I just think as a professor the biggest challenge is you don't have enough time to create the wonderful assignment that you want to because you're pulled in so many directions. So, this was successful because it helped. It gave some of that and it forced me to devote some time to the actual assignment...  
Sometimes you're just trying to fit 100 hours of work into, you know, a 24-hour day.

Earmarking a few of those hours for collaboration was productive for another participant, whose main takeaway from the experience was: “Engage with other people (faculty, librarians) and you will always benefit. Just taking these few hours helped recharge my batteries, and reminded me to pursue some ideas I've been kicking around in my courses.” Many faculty pointed out that there is no support for this degree of facilitated assignment

design work on campus in general or in departments unless it is self-started, and they worry seeking feedback might be asking too much from busy colleagues or signal lack of competence. Our workshop created time and community for this work, leaving participants feeling recharged and excited to innovate with new and different types of assignment final products.

In considering the significance of collaborative assignment design work and outcomes of our workshops, we believe librarians play an important role as facilitators of this work. NILOA's charrette toolkit is available for faculty to self-organize and facilitate these events on their own campuses; however, after working closely with participants we see benefits in librarian leadership in this arena.

Faculty comments about the charrettes indicated that librarian feedback was valued alongside feedback from other faculty, as represented by these survey responses about the most useful part of the workshop. From one participant, "[Librarian's] specific feedback. She obviously put a lot of time in to this, and I appreciate that. My peers were also very helpful," and from another, "I gained value from the discussion with other faculty and librarians who saw my assignment with fresh eyes." This feedback mapped onto the experiences of librarians, who appreciated being able to see and contribute to a range of assignments in the design phase, rather than "waiting until the students have an assignment" in hand already. Librarian expertise also comes into play when connecting faculty to research resources—and in shedding light on students' experiences with them.

In all practicality, faculty self-organizing assignment design work might be difficult given the competing demands for their time. For example, the first workshop cohort asked for an online space in which they could continue their dialogue and share assignment drafts and feedback. We did create that forum, but it was never used. Librarians facilitating this type of work can also help mitigate tensions based on teaching status, experience, or personality type that might arise in faculty groups. When asked about structured assignment design support, our faculty participants unanimously desired more. One faculty member specifically pointed to organization and facilitation as the most valuable aspects of the charrette: "the structure: clear schedule, clear preparation, clear facilitation; it kept us on track; the whole use of time was valuable." Many other participants expressed a need for support for the work of teaching across the university, expanding beyond existing opportunities for new faculty:

[W]e could get a little more discussion about that sort of thing. Because professors love this. “You do that? That’s so cool.” You know, “Nerd.” They get really excited about it...Hopefully we can kind of build on it. I think that’s why so many people jumped at your [workshop], because they were so excited by it...I would say there’s clearly a demand for this. And what I like about your [workshop], is that it’s across the university. Because we all talk in our departments, and most of us talk in our colleges, but I don’t sit down with geologists to talk about what we can do—that’s interesting. That’s why coming out of the library it was really valuable. So I would say do more of that university-wide stuff.

One of the key benefits of library-organized charrettes, then, is structuring the opportunity, making sure it actually happens, and holding a frame where vulnerability is encouraged and teachers can also be learners.

## Moving forward

After three successful workshops over the course of three semesters, there is momentum on our campus for the library to provide collaborative opportunities for faculty to engage in the work of assignment revision and teaching reflection. The initial funding for the first and second charrette helped us secure interest and offer a well-attended third charrette without compensation. Moving forward, we continue to think about the connection between offering compensation and the ability to ask more of participants, especially pre-work in reviewing their groups’ assignments prior to the workshop. Offering compensation and requiring pre-review of assignments allows for a tighter, shorter workshop and more participant buy-in and commitment. However, if compensation becomes impossible to sustain, we do feel modified workshop structures and incentive models will allow the event to continue. Partnering with AIS and calling on the network of previous participants will help with event promotion, particularly among new faculty. In spring 2018, we tested a “special topics” charrette with the focus of expanding the use of primary source materials from our Special Collections & Archives beyond disciplines (namely history and English) that traditionally collaborate with us in this area. Future workshop themes may include a focus on graduate instructors (who were welcome to participate in the third workshop, but were not specifically recruited) and a charrette at one or more of our regional campuses. We continue to look for ways to expand the diversity of assignments, courses, and instructors we reach through the workshops. We also plan to provide a train the trainers session for subject librarians about assignment design principles we have distilled from the charrette

experience. That session will hopefully bring these essential principles into the context of individual faculty consultations with subject librarians.

For academic librarians interested in exploring the possibility of assignment design charrettes on their own campuses, we have several recommendations:

Librarian pre-work: Investigate what is going on in departments and in other units on your campus. Are there any natural partnerships you could explore? Can you identify a gap where you can add value to existing programs and services? Build on internal (e.g., library statistics) and external (e.g., Project Information Literacy) data you already have to make a case for yourself, and check NILOA and the body of literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning for additional resources.

Incentives: Approach library administration or explore internal or external grants for compensation or funding for refreshments. If funding is not available, consider other incentives (e.g., badges, letters, annual review documentation, etc.).

Recruitment and marketing: The power of networking cannot be overemphasized. In your outreach, be inclusive of all possible constituents, such as faculty in distance education programs, those teaching online, and those who are pre-tenure or lecturers. Seek representation from a wide range of disciplines, class sizes, and instructional delivery methods when creating charrette groups.

Facilitation strategies: When assigning charrette groups, take time to consider group dynamics and be mindful of interpersonal issues, disciplines, and faculty rank. For librarians serving a dual role of facilitator and feedback-giver, it is essential to claim your expertise and place at the table.

Commitment to the follow-through: Think about what you will require of participants after the workshop and how you will communicate after the event. Share the value of what you did with trusted campus partners to position yourself to try it again.

## Conclusion

The impact of our workshops is still unfolding at our university. However, 61 faculty participated across the three workshops, and approximately 700 students completed assignments revised in the first one alone. This speaks to the value of these workshops as a practical, effective means of increasing librarian involvement in a sustainable, scalable way. A future article will present an in-depth analysis of the longer-term significance of the first

workshop, using interviews conducted with faculty after assignment revision and implementation to surface themes about faculty approaches to teaching, student learning, and library involvement (Wishkoski, Lundstrom, & Davis, 2019).

While numerous entities on university campuses are interested in supporting effective teaching, librarians have the opportunity to fill a niche. As an already interdisciplinary space on campus, the library provides both venue and expertise to promote knowledge sharing among faculty in a unique way. As one participant in the first workshop explained,

I think the thing that unites everybody at that [charrette] table is the fact that they all have an interest in education, and furthering ideas, and teaching people. But we don't often get together and collaborate on that stuff...Not everybody is invested in you being a good teacher for teaching's sake.

Librarians are invested in promoting good teaching “for teaching’s sake,” especially as it contributes to increasing information literacy. Dialogue, reflexivity, and openness to trying something new are essential ingredients in the endeavor of teaching and learning, and the interdisciplinary charrette format holds space for faculty to engage in these processes. Leveraging librarian expertise and the library as a forum for assignment design work sheds a new light on our investment in the work of teaching and learning.

## Notes

1. At Utah State University, librarians are faculty members. However, for simplicity of language, this paper uses “librarian” to refer to the faculty librarians (all of whom have specific subject assignments) who participated in the assignment design workshops, and “faculty” to refer to the non-librarian faculty and lecturer participants who were the target audience.
2. At Utah State University, the Academic and Instructional Services (AIS) department assists the University in advancing and supporting excellence in teaching, learning, and research. Although not involved in the first two workshops, their instructional designers participated in the third, as further explained below.
3. Complete workshop materials may be found at <http://libguides.usu.edu/assignmentdesign>.
4. Program details are at <http://www.empowerteaching.usu.edu/>.

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## Appendix A: Assignment submission template

Adapted from NILOA, *Organizing Assignment-Design Work on Your Campus: A Tool Kit of Resources & Materials*.

*Assignment Title:*

*Course using assignment:*

*Have you used this assignment before? When/how long?*

*Have you received feedback on this assignment from peers?*

- *Learning Outcomes (i.e. Students will be able to...):*
- *Context:* What happens prior in the semester? What skills do they learn leading up to this? Where in the semester is it positioned?
- *Scaffolds:* In-class supporting activities (if applicable):
- *Description for Students:*
- *Assessment:* How will you hold students accountable for learning/reaching your outcomes? (please attach any rubrics, test questions, etc...)

## Appendix B: Workshop agendas

| Workshop 1  | Workshop 2   | Agenda: Workshop 3  |
|---|--|---|
| <p><b>Morning</b></p> <p>10:00 Welcome, Brad Cole, Dean of Libraries</p> <p>10:05 – 10:15: Undergraduate Research &amp; High Impact Practices, Scott Bates</p> <p>10:15 – 10:20: Libraries and Assignment Design, Kacy Lundstrom</p> <p>10:20 – 11:00: Decoding the Disciplines</p> <p>11:00 – 12:00: Review Assignments</p> <p><b>Lunch</b></p> <p>12:00 – 1:00: Lunch (joined by Subject Librarians)</p> <p><b>Afternoon Charrette</b></p> <p>1:00 – 1:20: Introduction to charrette process</p> <p>1:20 – 1:45: Round 1</p> <p>1:45 – 2:10: Round 2</p> <p>2:10 – 2:20: BREAK</p> <p>2:20 – 2:45: Round 3</p> <p>2:45 – 3:10: Round 4</p> <p>3:10 – 3:20: BREAK</p> <p>3:20 – 3:35: Large Group Reflections</p> <p>3:35 – 3:45: Next steps/Study</p> <p>3:45 – 4:00: Feedback Survey</p> | <p>2:00pm Introductions</p> <p>2:15pm Charrette Structure</p> <p>2:30pm Round 1 begins</p> <p>2:55pm Round 2 begins</p> <p>3:20pm Round 3 begins</p> <p>3:45pm Break</p> <p>3:55pm Large Group Reflections</p> <p>4:15pm Feedback Survey</p> | <p>1:00pm Introductions</p> <p>1:15pm Review Assignments</p> <p>2:15pm Charrette Structure</p> <p>2:30pm Round 1 begins</p> <p>2:55pm Round 2 begins</p> <p>3:20pm Round 3 begins</p> <p>3:45pm Break</p> <p>3:55pm Large Group Reflections</p> <p>4:15pm Feedback Survey</p> |

## Appendix C: Guiding questions for peer assignment review

Adapted from NILOA, *Organizing Assignment-Design Work on Your Campus: A Tool Kit of Resources & Materials*.

Assignment title: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments from: \_\_\_\_\_

1. **Strengths:** What are the main strengths of this assignment?
2. **Clarity:** Is the assignment and its purpose clear to students? Is there potential for misunderstanding?
3. **Scaffolding:** Does the course provide sufficient practice, information, and sequenced activities on the assignment's topic to allow students to be successful?
4. **Implicit tasks:** How well does it provide a means for students to exhibit or demonstrate implicit tasks?
5. **Authenticity:** How could the final research product reflect authentic research practices in the discipline or engage a wider public? For example, could the end product be another media or genres than a traditional research paper?
6. **Assessment:** Does the assignment include a rubric or explicit set of criteria for evaluating student work on the assignment? Are there opportunities for peer feedback or instructor feedback at different steps of the assignment?
7. **Student perspective:** Thinking about the assignment from the student's point of view, what other questions or suggestions do you have?
8. **Other comments for the creator?**