Designing an Online Learning Experience to Scaffold a Field-Based Practicum for School Librarianship: Our Reflections and Student Responses

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This article details the context and design considerations for an online course accompanying a field-based practicum for a school librarian certification program at a regional university in Texas. These strategies could be helpful to other library science educators designing learning experiences that support fieldwork. We conclude by discussing benefits to designing activities that scaffold fieldwork and prompt metacognitive reflection on learning in the field.

Keywords: field-based work, instructional design, LIS curriculum, metacognitive reflection, online learning experience, practicum

In this article, we reflect on strategies we deployed in redesigning an online course that accompanies a field-based practicum for students seeking school librarian certification. Because our students continue to respond favorably to the redesign, sharing our approach may be helpful to other library science educators designing learning experiences (online or classroom-based) that accompany field-based learning. The Association for Library Science Education describes field-based work as "structured pre-professional work experience which takes place during graduate coursework or after coursework but preceding the degree" (ALISE, 1990). It is unpaid work administered by faculty of library schools at an independent host site where the fieldwork occurs (Brannon, 2014, p. 274). It is common for students to take some form of practicum during their studies to gain a better understanding of the connections between theory and professional practice (Church et al., 2012; Južnič & Pymm, 2016). While a great deal of literature addresses practica and fieldwork, fewer articles address online mentoring of field-based practica (Sherman & Camilli, 2014).

Context for the design

This learning experience was designed for a school librarian certification program at a regional university in Texas. The program serves students throughout the state, almost all them employed full time as teachers. Because of the geographically large service area and limited discretionary time of its students, the program is offered completely online.

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KEY POINTS:

- The focus of student work should be the thinking moves involved in leading learning through librarianship, such as understanding and applying the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of library programs.
- Students need to see how various library programs/components connect to form the "big picture" of what effective libraries and librarians do to support and lead learning in schools.
- Students should be given opportunities to learn about field sites other than the one they are in, as well as the perspectives of mentor librarians other than their own, and should be compelled to develop real solutions to real problems in their fieldwork.

However, as is common with educator preparation programs in most states, Texas law requires programs in school librarianship to include "structured field-based training focused on actual experiences" in addition to rigorous coursework focused on knowledge and skills (Texas Administrative Code, 2001/2009). A field-based practicum must be completed in an actual school library under the supervision of a certified school librarian for a minimum of 160 hours during the school year, as opposed to during summer recess. To fulfill the required number of hours during a 15-week semester (a little over ten hours per week), students typically complete their practicum in the school where they teach, working in the library during their planning periods and lunch breaks, before and after classroom instruction hours, or during after school and at evening events held in the library.

In addition to supervision by a certified school librarian at the field site, program faculty facilitate, observe, and evaluate student performance in the field. Again, because of the large geographical area of the various field sites, this evaluation takes place in an online course and comprises assignments and activities that document student experiences and allow faculty to evaluate them and provide feedback.

Analysis of existing course

The Texas Administrative Code (TAC 2001/2009) details the standards required by educator preparation programs in the curriculum for school librarian certification. Additionally, Texas Educator Certification provides a preparation manual for the certification exam for school librarians (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The manual lists the standards, as well as the domains and competencies for knowledge, skills, and abilities that underlie each of the standards. The existing course was designed on 54 description statements that aligned with three domains and six competencies.

To document their field experiences, students were asked to submit descriptor reports, describing activities in their field work that correlated to each description statement. Students had flexibility in selecting which descriptors they would report on each week, but they were required to submit 54 descriptor reports throughout the course. Additionally, they were asked to keep a time log of their activities in the field library, complete analyses of five journal articles, participate in class discussions, and complete other tasks demonstrating their knowledge of the Texas School Librarian Standards (Texas Administrative Code, 2001/2009), as developed by the instructor.

In our analysis of the existing course, we identified four problems to be addressed by the redesign.

- **Descriptors versus standards:** Although the descriptor report assignments provided valuable learning, students perceived them as busy work, disconnected from their fieldwork and overly burdensome when coupled with it. Moreover, the sheer number of reports and other assignments left little time for tasks related to the overarching Principles and Standards for Learner-Centered Librarianship (Texas Administrative Code, 2001/2009).
- **Coursework versus fieldwork:** Many of the description statements are addressed in the six courses that are prerequisites for the practicum. All courses embed practical application of knowledge, skills, and abilities into course projects or assignments, such as a facilities layout plan for a library, a collection and weeding policy, or an annotated bibliography of children's literature, and provide a more in-depth application of the description statements than the brief descriptor reports required in practicum.
- **Feedback on performance:** Feedback to students was related more to their preparation of the descriptor reports than their performance in the field. Grades and comments on the reports pertained to the format, language, and content of the report itself, rather than performance of the knowledge, skills, and abilities applied in the school library field site.
- **Responding to conflict and/or critical issues:** An important impetus for field-based work is so that candidates for certification are exposed to some of the conflicts and critical issues that educators face and gain practice responding to or resolving them while guided by an experienced mentor. Without intentional design of or for some of these issues, student experiences with them are left to chance. Some students may be confronted with some conflicts, others may be engaged with other issues, and some students may not be exposed to any.

Redesign of the course

After we analyzed problems with the existing course, the goals of the redesign became clear. Our primary goal was to get students to use their field experience to understand how librarians think, work through difficulties, make judgements, make decisions, and identify the issues of a school library program. Ritchhart et al. (2011) describe this approach as "making thinking moves explicit for learners" (p. 133). To accomplish this goal, we wanted to design activities and assessments that scaffolded the fieldwork, giving it structure and support, rather than overwhelming it with written reports. We also wanted to shift the focus to the overarching Standards for Learner-Centered Librarianship and their corresponding principles, as provided in Table 1. Finally, we wanted to create an opportunity for students to experience and respond to critical issues that school librarians face.

We felt these goals aligned with the literature on field-based work in librarianship. The integration of practical experience into the LIS curriculum as a means to acquire professional values and identities recurs throughout library curriculum literature (Lyders & Wilson, 1991; Mardis, 2007; Shannon, 2004). Perceptions of the value of the field-based

Table 1 Texas Standards and Principles of Learner-Centered Librarianship

Standard	Principles
I. **Learner-Centered Teaching and Learning**: promote the integration of curriculum, resources, and teaching strategies to ensure the success of all students as the effective creators and users of ideas and information, enabling them to become lifelong learners.	1. The librarian models and promotes collaborative instruction with teachers, as determined by the independent and diverse needs of all learners, and within the context of state curriculum standards. 2. The librarian works collaboratively with students, teachers, and the community to promote local, state, and national reading initiatives that encourage learners to read, write, view, speak, and listen for understanding and enjoyment. 3. The librarian collaborates, designs, and provides ongoing instruction for staff and students in the integration of information technology and information literacy, emphasizing and modeling the ethical use of resources.
II. **Learner-Centered Program Leadership and Management**: demonstrate effective school library program leadership and management throughout the school, the district, and in local, state, and national activities and associations.	1. Planning: As an advocate for libraries, the librarian leads in the development and implementation of a library vision, mission, goals, objectives, and strategic plan that incorporate sound policies and practices. 2. Organizing and Staffing: The librarian manages staff, volunteers, and partners to support the curriculum, to satisfy learners' diverse needs, and to encourage lifelong learning. 3. Budgets/Funding: The librarian advocates for funding and manages school library program budgets to build and maintain a program with resources and services that support a curriculum designed to develop information-literate students who achieve success in the classroom and function effectively in the community. 4. Research/Assessment/Reporting: The librarian manages a successful program by demonstrating the value of the library program through research, data collection, assessment, evaluation, and dissemination of information about services and resources.
III. **Learner-Centered Technology and Information Access**: promote the success of all students and staff by facilitating the access, use, and integration of technology, telecommunications, and information systems to enrich the curriculum and enhance learning.	1. The library media program provides a balanced, carefully selected, and systematically organized collection of print and electronic library resources that are sufficient to meet students' needs in all subject areas and that are continuously monitored for currency and relevancy. 2. The librarian models and promotes the highest standards of conduct, ethics, and integrity in the use of the Web and other print and electronic resources. 3. The librarian employs existing and emerging technologies to access, evaluate, and disseminate information for integration into instructional programs. 4. The librarian models information problem solving processes while providing formal and informal instruction about reference and research techniques.

Table 1 Continued

Standard	Principles
IV. **Learner-Centered Library Environment:** provide design guidelines for facilities to allow for manipulation, production, and communication of information by all members of the learning community.	1. The design of the school library is aligned with the educational objectives of the learning community. The library environment is designed for flexible access and supports all educational objectives of the library program. Educational specifications for any renovation or proposed new facility will include a description of the proposed project expressing the range of issues and alternatives, in accordance with 19 TAC 61.1036, School Facilities Standards for Construction on or after January 1, 2004, Subchapter CC, Commissioner's Rules Concerning School Facilities. 2. The library is designed to serve as a flexible, functional, and barrier-free simultaneous use facility for individuals, small groups, and classes as described by state and federal guidelines. The library is also designed to maximize the use of available space to permit displays of student, faculty, and community-produced materials, and collections. The facility provides all members of the learning community opportunities to explore and meet their information and recreational needs during and beyond the school day. The library provides an exemplary level of safety, security, and an age-appropriate facility for all individuals, small groups, and classes.
V. **Learner-Centered Connections to Community**: provide information equity by working for universal literacy; defending intellectual freedom; preserving and making accessible the human record; ensuring access to print and electronic resources; connecting school faculty, staff, and students to community resources and services as needed; and by connecting community members to school resources and services as appropriate.	1. The librarian develops a school library program that offers students, faculty, and staff, families, partners, and community constituents opportunities for participation and collaboration in the library and educational community. The librarian promotes/encourages broad school and community-based advocacy for the school library program to support student success. 2. The librarian facilitates broad access to library resources and provides opportunities for use for students, faculty and staff, families, partners, and community constituents. 3. The librarian is knowledgeable about learning differences and ethnically and culturally diverse interests of the school and local community and develops a school library program that responds to these unique community characteristics. 4. The librarian, in partnership with community organizations, develops, maintains, and markets the vision, goals, and needs of the school library program to the broadest community constituency to promote the library and student success.

Table 1 Continued

Standard	Principles
VI. **Learner-Centered Information Science and Librarianship:** promote the success of all students and staff by: providing information equity; working for universal literacy; defending intellectual freedom; preserving and making accessible the heritage of all cultures; and ensuring that equal access to resources in all formats is available for everyone.	1. The librarian works collaboratively with other information professionals in support of the library program, student achievement, and the profession, and understands the role of all types of libraries in an integrated learning environment. 2. The librarian creates a school library program that is recognized as the central element in the intellectual life of the school as evidenced by use of statistical measures to evaluate and improve the program. 3. The librarian applies and implements the principles and concepts of collection development: evaluation, selection, acquisition, and organization of information, and employs standard bibliographic and retrieval techniques. 4. The librarian evaluates and selects existing and emergent technologies to support the library program in coordination with the Texas Education Agency's Long-Range Plan for Technology and the campus STaR Chart. 5. The librarian communicates effectively with students and staff to determine information needs and applies knowledge of literature to guide development of independent readers. 6. The librarian demonstrates ethical behavior and promotes the principles of intellectual freedom, information access, privacy, and proprietary rights. 7. The librarian engages in continuous self-evaluation and self-directed learning for professional growth by participating in and contributing to professional associations and publications.

Source: Texas Administrative Code (2001/2009)

practicum have risen and declined over time (Ball, 2008), yet there is consensus among LIS scholars that a field-based practicum allows students to teach and assess learning, collaborate, develop a vision for library programs, and engage in long-range planning (Robinson & McNary, 2021).

Evaluating library programs

In addition to detailing the standards themselves, the state education agency has developed a rubric for evaluating school library programs using the established Standards for Learner-Centered Librarianship (Texas State Library and Archives Commissioners, 2005). This rubric presents not only the standards but also descriptions of varying levels of attainment of the standards: exemplary, recognized, acceptable, and below standard. The redesigned course placed a comprehensive evaluation of the programs at the field-site library at the beginning of the practicum experience. After introducing themselves to each other and setting up their online time log in the first week of the course, weeks 2 through 7

involve applying the rubric for one standard per week to evaluating the programs at the field-site library and preparing an evaluation report that documents the evaluation findings, an activity promoting many of the competencies for library managers identified in recent literature (Raju & Muthu, 2019).

In each of these early weeks, students become conversant with one standard, explore the programs in their field library related to those standards, rate the library programs using the rubric, and prepare an evaluation report assigning ratings and providing evidence to support each rating. Gathering information and evidence about the library's programs involves working closely with the mentor librarian while in the site library. Since the evaluation report is directly linked to programs in the field library, analysis and preparation of the report could be completed after hours and still be counted toward the required hours of field library work, enabling students who worked full-time as teachers a meaningful way to accrue additional fieldwork hours outside of the school day. Moreover, this activity provides meaning and structure not only for practicum students but also for mentor librarians. Students in practicum prior to this redesign commonly voiced concerns that their mentor librarian assigned them clerical tasks rather than administrative activities. Coupled with a set of guidelines and expectations prepared for mentor librarians, this activity reinforced the level of work that mentor librarians were expected to support.

Expanding student experiences to multiple libraries

Not all libraries are "created equal," so we knew that student experiences in their field-based work would be as diverse as the site libraries in which they worked. To allow students to get a sense of programs in libraries other than their field library, we wanted students to share their evaluation reports with each other rather than submitting them directly to the instructor. However, we wanted this sharing to involve a form of metacognitive reflection on their experience, rather than peer review of the report itself.

We settled on discussion forums in which students were asked to create a new thread, attach their evaluation report, and reflect on their discoveries as they consulted with their mentors, researched, evaluated, and compiled their reports. Reflection prompts were kept simple but made use of the "language of thinking" described in Ritchhart (2002): "The language of thinking consists of all the words we use to refer to thinking processes, products, states, or stances" (p. 130). Most of these prompts asked students to identify a thinking state, such as "What surprised you the most as you analyzed the results of your evaluation?" or "What frustrated you as you prepared this evaluation report?" After responding to the prompt and attaching their report, students were required to respond to between three and five classmates' posts and/or reports. Viewing and responding to the reflections of a few classmates and their reports on programs in other school libraries extended the boundaries of each individual student's experience, allowing them to learn about programs in other libraries, as well. Although they were required to respond to only three to five classmates, the reports and experiences of the entire class were available to them. Many students responded to more than required. Moreover, these discussions took place each week over six weeks. So even those who viewed and responded to only three classmates each week gained at least 18

different insights than they would have if their reports had been submitted directly to the instructor.

Examining the bigger picture

A significant advantage to dedicating a week to each of the six Standards for Learner-Centered Librarianship was the deep dive that it allowed students to take in gathering and analyzing evidence for their ratings. However, a disadvantage of this approach is that it can make it more difficult to get a sense of the bigger picture, an important skill in contemporary librarianship (AASL, 2018; ALA et al., 2019; Raju & Muthu, 2019). Therefore, week 8 of the course was dedicated to developing just that. Students had applied the rubric to evaluate each standard based on ratings of the principles underlying each of them. In the eighth week of the course, they were tasked with creating a dashboard of all six standards, assigning ratings to each standard based on the ratings of the underlying principles. They were asked to share the data with their mentor librarian and to identify together the areas of greatest need for improvement.

Developing real solutions to a real problem

Developing real solutions to real problems is a meaningful instructional strategy in almost any course on any topic. In a practicum, we would argue that it is an essential one, and it has been shown to be effective in other LIS coursework (Han, 2008) and is a recommended approach in LIS education (AASL, 2018; ALA et al., 2019; Church et al., 2012; Raju & Muthu, 2019). In our redesigned course, students consulted with their mentor librarian to identify solutions or projects that would address the library's area(s) of greatest need for improvement, identified using the dashboard and evaluation reports. The project(s) would vary based on results of the evaluation and library needs. We required students to select projects that would address principles and/or standards that showed opportunities for improvement, not projects that would address a principle or standard that rated "exemplary." Moreover, the project(s) needed to address principles that students were in a position to influence. For example, Standard II, Principle 2 addresses levels of professional and paraprofessional staffing. If a school library rated below standard on this principle, it isn't likely that students could do much to improve this rating. Finally, the project(s) needed to yield some sort of work product that students could turn in for evaluation/grading: for example, a lesson plan for a unit of library instruction, a design plan for modifying the layout of the library, web-based resources for collaborating with teachers on problem-based learning units, a proposal for additional funds or resources. The number of projects depended on the number of standards addressed. The assignment required students to address at least three standards, either in one project or in individual projects that each addressed a different standard. We asked students to submit not only the finished product(s)/project(s) but to also show alignment to standards or reasoning behind the selection and development of the project(s). The vehicle for this was an electronic portfolio that presented not only the products developed for the library but also the evaluation report and the connections between the evaluation results, the standards/principles students intended the project(s) to address, and how the project would address them.

Wrestling with key issues that librarians face

It is the hope that practica or field experiences expose participants to critical issues and dilemmas that professionals in the field face. However, when left to chance, some students encounter a dilemma or two while they are in the field; others do not. In order to allow all students similar exposure, we selected a few key issues and created case-study scenarios for students to discuss with their mentor librarian, a strategy advocated by both Horava and Curran (2012) and Raju and Muthu (2019). Issues selected pertained to leadership, book challenges, patron misuse of library space, impact of changing student population on budget, and flexible scheduling. After discussing the case with their mentor librarian, students presented their responses (what they would do to address the issue presented in the case) in an online discussion forum with other students in the class, and responded to between three and five classmates' posts. These case-study discussions were spread over weeks 9 to 13 as "in-class" activities while students worked independently on the projects for their field library.

Reflecting on changes in thinking

We closed the course with a discussion that asked students to reflect on how their thinking changed from the beginning of the course and field-based experience to the end. The discussion prompt asked them to apply the thinking routine "I used to think … Now I think" (Project Zero, n.d.) to the topic of learner-centered librarianship, with "used to" referring to before the course began and "now" referring to the end of the course. As with other discussions in the course, students were asked to comment on the posts of three to five classmates, engaging them with additional perspectives that may have been similar or quite different from their own.

Student reflections on changes in their thinking

While formal evaluation of the course design is beyond the scope of this article, student responses in the final course discussion ("I used to think … Now I think") suggest that the redesign is supporting our aims. We offer these responses so that library science educators may decide whether strategies we deployed may be helpful to their students' field-based learning.

We wanted to focus student work on the thinking moves involved for leading learning in a library: evaluating and improving library programs, for example, rather than collecting and checking out books. As one student responded, "I used to think that the elementary library was simply for story time and checking out books. Now I realize that the library is a hub for enrichment, research, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. . . . the standards evaluation was one of the most impactful and meaningful assignments that we complete."

We wanted to shift students' thinking from the trees to the forest, scaffolding their ability to see the big picture of what learner-centered librarianship looks like. As another student responded, "I used to think that the Standards and Principles for Librarianship were overwhelming . . . they reminded me a lot of the TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] and English Language Proficiency Standards. . . . Now . . . I understand them

a lot more. . . . I was able to make connections from these standards to experiences in the library and in the classroom."

We wanted students to share their experiences so that they could learn from the experiences that others had in different libraries with different mentors. As a third student expressed it, "I feel that I have grown into a librarian through my practicum! I am so grateful for this experience, for my time interacting with all my classmates, and especially for my mentor librarian. I now know that a librarian's reach is way beyond the walls of the library. Beyond the walls of the school. The library is the hub of all learning and central for community involvement, students' engagement, and campus level collaboration."

We wanted to give purpose and context to field-based learning through development of real solutions to real problems. A student indicates this particular design element illuminated opportunities for personal and professional growth: "I used to think . . . that I would not have any room to grow. Now I think . . . and I know that I have so much more that I can accomplish. Part of my practicum was to create a lunch and learn for the teachers on a database that the school district provides. This has . . . helped teachers to begin to lean on me for information. In turn, [they] are . . . encouraging their students to come to the library in search for information and books as well. This was essential in showing teachers that the library can provide resources that are useful."

Conclusion

In closing, we offer the following suggestions to library science educators seeking to scaffold decision-making and problem-solving in field-based work:

1. Make the focus of student work the thinking moves involved in leading learning through librarianship, such as understanding and applying the criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of library programs.
2. Help students see how various library programs/components connect to form the "big picture" of what effective libraries and librarians do to support and lead learning in schools.
3. Provide opportunities for students to learn about field sites other than the one they are in, as well as the perspectives of mentor librarians other than their own.
4. Compel students to develop real solutions to real problems in their fieldwork.

We find that these are effective strategies to help students make meaning of their field experience and ultimately understand how librarians think, work through difficulties, make judgements, make decisions, and identify the issues in a school library program. Although this list is not exhaustive, we have found that these key strategies did much to make learning in their fieldwork more meaningful for our students.

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