The LibRAT Program: The Power of Peer Reference and Instruction

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Abstract

Even in a challenging economic climate it is nonetheless possible to *expand* and *improve* reference and instruction services to students. The Robert E. Kennedy Library at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo has recently accomplished exactly this by leveraging the dynamics of peer-to-peer learning. The LibRAT (Library Reference Assistance Technician) Program has engaged undergraduates to provide assistance at the Research Help Desk and more recently has enlisted them to lead introductory instructional sessions. LibRATs now staff the Research Help Desk 60 out of 70 hours per week, and in Fall 2011 and Winter 2012 they led 72 out of 104 introductory sessions for English and Communications courses. Provided here are a brief history of the LibRAT Program, an overview of peer learning and its application to academic libraries, and finally, some key principles that can be applied to hiring, training, and implementing continuous assessment in such a program.

History of the LibRAT Program

The LibRAT (Library Reference Assistance Technician) Program at Cal Poly was first developed in 2009-2010. The LibRATs were originally stationed in campus residence halls to provide reference. When deployed in this manner they did not receive enough questions to justify this "outpost" effort. Still, wanting to leverage the power of peer learning dynamics, in Winter 2010 they were brought into Kennedy Library itself to staff the Research Help Desk. In Spring 2011 they also began leading information literacy instruction sessions for lower-division courses. In Winter 2012, LibRATs staffed the Research Help Desk 60 out of 70 hours per week, and local chat reference 35 out of 55 hours per week. In Fall 2011 and Winter 2012 LibRATs led 72 out of 104 instruction sessions for English and Communications courses, reaching over 1,600 students. In our previous model, using only two librarians, we could not have attained this capacity. Moreover, the ratings the LibRATs received via in-class evaluations improved each quarter, exceeding the ratings of the librarians who led similar sessions. Recorded transactions at the Research Help Desk also increased over this period by 59%, suggesting a synergy between instruction and reference, as the peer session leaders also promoted their activities at the desk.

Peer Learning

The effectiveness of peer learning has been demonstrated through substantial research and has been increasingly leveraged in the domain of higher education (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Williams, 2011). Based on foundational work by Jean Piaget in developmental psychology and the sociocultural learning theory of L.S. Vygotsky, peer learning has been expanded into concepts and pedagogical methodologies such as Peer Assisted Learning (Topping & Ehly, 1998). Peer learning is effective due to both affective and cognitive components, and has a range of names, including peer learning, peer counseling, peer tutoring and peer mentoring. It works best for both parties when there is only a slight differential in the knowledge level of the parties, as both parties can engage in cognitive challenges. Peer learning leverages social relationships in a broader lived context, and peers learn well from each other

through simplification, prevention of overload, error and self-correction, identification, bonding, coping and reduced anxiety (Topping & Ehly, 1998).

Brief History of Peer Reference and Instruction

Examples of undergraduate peer reference can be found in the literature starting in the mid-1970s, with increasing incidence over ensuing decades. Early rationales for using undergraduates to provide reference range from pragmatic considerations (Heinlen, 1976) to intentions of improving minority retention (Piele, 1982; MacAdam & Nichols, 1989). In almost all cases, concern is expressed that the students might not provide the best service due to lack of expertise in question triage, and in some instances one finds extreme restraints placed on the kinds of questions students are allowed to answer (Neuhaus, 2001). Notwithstanding such concern and caution, in nearly all examples in the literature where undergraduates have been deployed for reference, librarians have expressed surprise at how much the librarians learn from the students. When it comes to instruction, however, conservatism and caution reign supreme. Although there are a few mentions of employing undergraduates for instruction (Piele, 1982; Stelling, 1996; Holliday & Nordgren, 2005; Fensom, 2006; Deese-Roberts, 2000), the students' roles are usually severely restricted, limited to working on instructional materials, or merely assisting the librarians who lead sessions. An interesting exception is provided by Wabash College. In the 1970s, students at Wabash provided reference and instruction, and many of the observations made in assessments of this CLR-funded program foreshadow insights that in later years are encompassed in language applied to peer learning (Tucker, 1975, 1977). Currently Brigham Young University employs undergraduates to provide basic instructional sessions and reference (Julian, 2011), and my suspicion, though unconfirmed, is that there are other contemporary examples. -- It should be noted that it is not as though one is hiring two sets of students with two sets of characteristics to perform two totally disparate tasks. The similarity in behavioral competencies for reference and instruction have been explicitly noted before (Botts and Emmons, 2002) and certainly the interpersonal and communication skills desired in reference are comparable to those desired in instructors (Belanger, 2009). All of these, in turn, are quite similar to the qualities valued in peer mentors (Terrion & Leonard, 2007).

Resistance to the use of undergraduates for reference is mentioned in much of the literature (Heinlen, 1976; Piele, 1982; Campbell, 1992). Even when libraries began moving to tiered reference in the 1990s, those providing tiered reference were most often paraprofessionals or graduate students (Oberg, 1993). In reading this sampling of academic library literature, the changing technologies of the decades reveal themselves through mention of nouns such as "World Almanac," "micro-computing," and "CD-ROM" and it might be conjectured that earlier technologies required too great of a knowledge base for an undergraduate to properly possess. With the current generation of students who have grown up searching in a hyperlinked search environment, it is perhaps less of a reach for them to provide basic reference. There is also the possibility that librarians are loathe to give up their grip on the reference desk, viewing it as a quality control issue, or alternatively, as a threat to their professional prestige.

The LibRAT Program: Key Principles and Applications

From its outset, four key principles have been applied to the implementation of the LibRAT program at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo.

The first is summarized in the bare statement that disposition cannot be taught. We seek students who are conscientious and helpful by nature. To do this we gather large numbers of applications and look for students with both service industry jobs and volunteer work in their background. Questions posed in interviews about these elements can reveal much about the students' dispositions. If we hire the right people, the rest is easy.

The second principle is to engage in both vertical and horizontal communication. The LibRATs are encouraged to communicate as a group as much as they wish, and, certainly, as much as they need to. They handle nearly all scheduling irregularities on their own until no solution can be found amongst them at which point it is kicked up to a supervisor. Vertical communication is limited to essential notifications and can be applied both singly and en masse.

The third principle is distributed expertise. We want all our staff at the desk -- supervisor, half-time librarian, and LibRATs -- to share everything they learn and know. To this end we all read printouts of chat and reference transactions, annotate them freely, and leave initials on each page. We also share new things we learn freely.

The fourth principle is to involve the students as partners. We debrief at the end of each quarter to find out what is working and what is not. It was in fact the students who suggested offering follow-up "search" sessions to instructors based on successful two-hour sessions in which the second portion, devoted to searching with the session leader on hand to coach and trouble-shoot, proved so helpful to the students. The LibRATs suggested inviting instructors to sign up for two sessions, one "sage on the stage" and the other more "guide on the side." Several instructors immediately signed up for such a "two-shot" sequence.

Conclusion and Implications

Undergraduates can provide basic reference (Heinlen, 1976; Faix et al., 2010) and, as proven by the LibRAT program, they can successfully lead basic information literacy instruction sessions. Because they relate well to their peers, they may even do this more effectively than librarians.

The question might then be raised: what is the role of the librarian? My answer is quite simple: the role of the librarian is not to answer every question or lead every session, but rather, to facilitate an environment in which every question can be answered, and in which the greatest number of students can be reached with timely and well-designed information literacy sessions that enhance student learning. The role of the librarian is to become what Jerry Campbell called many years ago an "Access Engineer" (Campbell, 1992). Such an access engineer knows the topography of information, but also knows the users well and arranges it so information gets to the user rapidly. In an academic library, the users are our students, and we should know them by working with them and letting them reach their peers with the message that libraries do have tools and resources that will not only abet their learning but also make their lives easier.

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