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Research in Action: Impacting Library Communities with Field-Based Projects

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Abstract:

Our library and information studies (LIS) program is grounded in the principals of social justice, leadership, and authentic practice. One way candidates of the program meet these ideals is through participation in a required internship. During the internship students complete an independent project on site at their internship location.

Using Elliot's (1991) steps of action research, the students in the internship course identify an issue, collect or use data to inform action, analyze the findings, and reflect on the results. An initial needs-assessment is conducted. This includes establishing a rationale to inform practice. Students then implement a hands-on response to the identified need within the information setting during the semester of the internship. Completion of the research project allows for an in-depth, independent learning experience while providing student engagement at the internship site.

This presentation provides an overview of the action research project. It also highlights projects conducted by students, showcasing the broad range of interest, experiences, and depth of work undertaken by interns across a variety of information settings. Finally, it explores the benefits and challenges of this assignment and faculty opportunities realized when coordinating a mandatory research experience to meet the demands of a credit-bearing internship course.

Keywords: Action Research, Internships, Field experiences

Introduction

Our library and information studies (LIS) program is grounded in the principals of social justice, leadership, and authentic practice. One way candidates of the program meet these ideals is through participation in a required internship. The internship, therefore, becomes an opportunity to transform ideals into practice. During the internship, students complete an

action research, impact project on-site at their internship location. This experience compliments the distance learning coursework of the program.

Using Elliot's (1991) steps of action research, the students in the internship course identify a question or issue, collect or use data to inform action, analyze the findings, and reflect on the results. An initial needs-assessment is conducted, aligned to library type of interest. Working closely with a site supervisor, students identify a problem of practice or area of concern to address. This includes establishing a rationale and aligning the project to the library setting's mission. Students then implement a hands-on response to the identified need during the semester they are completing the internship. Completion of the impact, action research project allows for an in-depth and independent learning experience while providing student engagement at the internship site.

Review of Literature

Many LIS students choose online programs because the program does not require the student to relocate (Oguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015). Students in online LIS programs are typically non-traditional, being slightly older, often employed full-time while attending class, and usually seeking the flexibility of afforded of some asynchronous coursework. Mellon and Kester (2004) surveyed online LIS students to determine program satisfaction and areas for improvement. Experiential learning opportunities was one area recognized as an area for development. Additionally, a need for human interaction was one of their primary findings. This aligns with the need to foster professional dispositions that include working with other library professionals (Bush and Jones, 2009). An internship course provides the flexibility, interaction, and hands-on authentic practice that can be challenging to infuse in on-line coursework.

Participants

Each student graduating from our Library and Information Studies program is required to complete a full semester internship course. The semester prior to the internship, each student submits an application with an anticipated internship site. Students may select a site that aligns to their area of interest, such as school library, academic library, special collection, etc. This site is then confirmed with a signed site agreement. This document lists several anticipated intern objectives and goals negotiated between the intern and the site supervisor. Once the internship begins, the intern and site supervisor, with the approval of the faculty instructor, identify a semester long action research, impact project.

Impact Project Design

Interns participate in action research (Elliott, 1991) that provides an experiential approach to meeting the varied needs of an information workplace. For interns to determine their impact within an environment, they must have knowledge and skills in planning and assessment. Completion of this culminating activity demonstrates expertise both in content as well as reflection on experiences.

The Impact Project consists of five sections: Baseline Assessment, Planning, Project Implementation, Assessment Analysis, Personal Learning and Reflection

The baseline assessment allows interns to measure the status quo of the library environment before their project's intervention. This needs assessment should be informed by the general impact they seek on the environment. This baseline assessment must be presented both narratively and through charts and graphs.

The planning step asks the intern to merge the baseline measures of the environment with a review of literature on the topic of the planned intervention to develop a research-informed plan of action. In this section, the intern should first present a review of the relevant research, to include the relationship between concepts and practices specific to this environment. Next, the intern should present a review of the rationale specific to the needs of the site to include various historical, cultural, skill-based, language, interests, and user focused concerns.

During the project implementation, the intern presents a plan to engage in an organized action informed by the literature and the site stakeholder context. The plan should be detailed and include specific project strategies. Project strategies are a series of actions or interventions aligned with the project objectives and the site mission. Strategies must be measurable.

Once the implementation is complete, an assessment of the action is conducted. This assessment determines any change that may be evidenced. The intern collects and presents data about this change. First, a measurement that correlates to both the project objectives and the baseline data collection instrument must be developed and deployed. This data is presented, both graphically and in narrative, and discussed and a comparison of impact is formed within the analysis. The intern should link this analysis to the prior research used in the planning section.

Finally, the intern conducts a self-reflection on the process of completing this project. In this reflection, the intern gives thoughtful consideration to the ways in which the needs of diverse stakeholders have been addressed as well as the impact of the project, citing specific indicators as evidence. Interns should also reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the project and imagine alternative paths to facilitate this work in a similar environment in the future, as well as detail implications of the project for future practice.

At the end of the semester, the university faculty member evaluates the project to determine if the intern has successfully met the learning targets for the activity. The project is evaluated against a developed rubric. Many interns also have the opportunity to present a final product to their site stakeholders.

Select Intern Project Results

Interns in the program have selected and developed projects demonstrating a variety of areas of emphasis. Below is a description of four intern projects provided as exemplars. These projects are described by type of project focus to include examples of collection development, focus on patron or library programming, exploration of library instruction, or projects that impact digitalization of records in a special collection.

Collection Development

Many interns have worked toward impacting a library collection, both print and non-print. This could include examining the current content of a collection for focused improvement or planning for evaluation, selection, and weeding of materials. *Intern One* worked extensively within a large public library system to first develop a protocol for conducting a diversity

audit. She then applied this criteria to the collection to evaluate resources and plan for improvement to better meet the needs and perspectives of the community. Through this focused project, the intern was able to establish selection criteria, determine materials to benefit the collection, and use selection aids and tools to identify new resources for acquisition. Through this project, the intern was able to help build an \$80,000 Inclusive Action Collection Development Plan that will be implemented over 3 years for the library.

Programming

Improving programming for participants has been an area of concern in many internship settings, especially as libraries begin to recover from COVID-19 closings. *Intern Two* completed a project situated within a public library, exploring the impact of social media promotion on library programs. This project identified the impact of twitter use to engage patrons. Her founding on demonstrated targeted social media campaigns had an impact on both new and sustained engagement of patrons for promotion and programming in the library.

Instruction

Interns set in school and academic settings were eager to focus attention on instructional pedagogy and the impact of these strategies on users in the library settings. *Intern Three* used the opportunity of the impact project to vary instructional activities in a distance learning setting and explore engagement of freshmen in an information literacy, general education course. This project identified that students in an online information literacy course who participated in hybrid activities perceived themselves to be more successful than those who did not participate in these opportunities.

Digitization and Special Collections

Other opportunities include the change to contribute to on-going projects in special collections and sites. *Intern Four* was able to make a profound impact on the digitization of resources for a local historic preservation site. Through this project over 1,000 records were added to the digital repository and are now properly cataloged. These materials can now be accessed and reviewed.

Conclusion

The LIS program is new and continues to emphasize experiential learning and authentic learning experiences for and by the students in the program. As Mellon and Kester (2004) suggest, human connection is critical in an online program. The internship experience is a key way the program builds a connection to the field and those working within it.

The purpose of the impact project is for candidates to demonstrate proficiency in the context of university, as well as accreditation, competencies through an authentic evidence-based project design. However, each MLIS student works on an independent project, based on independent interest and site need. This can be challenging for faculty overseeing the student group each semester. Each student is independently coached through the action research process. This requires additional faculty time. Additionally, not all site supervisors are skilled at mentoring students through this process. For some, this presents as an additional hurdle to supervising an intern.

Though each of these challenges can be mitigated on an individual basis, they can be stressful for individuals at the time. Most interns feel a sense of accomplishment at the end of the semester and students cite the internship as a beneficial learning experience.

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