

# Reimagining Scholarly Communication through Experiential Learning: Merging Theory and Practice for MLIS Students

## Abstract or Résumé:

The lack of consistent training for scholarly authors, peer reviewers, and editors is a problem across disciplines, but it is one that affects academic librarians in a unique variety of ways. Like instructional faculty, academic librarians are generally required to engage in scholarly activity, but they are also increasingly in the position of providing guidance on and advocating for emerging trends in scholarly communication. This presentation will describe how the creation of a student-run journal and an associated scholarly communication course in Western University's Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS) are helping to meet this need.

## 1. Introduction

The lack of consistent training for scholarly authors, peer reviewers, and editors is a problem across disciplines, but it is one that affects academic librarians in a unique variety of ways. Like instructional faculty, academic librarians are generally required to engage in scholarly activity, but they are also increasingly in the position of providing guidance on and advocating for emerging trends in scholarly communication. As such, aspiring academic librarians must have both a firm grounding in the practice of scholarly communication and be conversant in its more theoretical dimensions. Students in master of library and information science (MLIS) programs must be empowered with the knowledge and skills to become scholars in their own right that take an active role in shaping the future of scholarly communication. This presentation will describe how the creation of a student-run journal and an associated scholarly communication course in Western University's Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS) are helping to meet this need.

## 2. ELIP and the Human Element of Scholarly Communication

In the fall of 2018, the FIMS Graduate Library launched an MLIS student-run journal to provide a publishing venue for students in the MLIS program. The journal, *Emerging Library & Information Perspectives* (ELIP), is fully open access and managed by a part-time student editor employed by the library. Because the MLIS program at Western does not require students to complete a major research project, ELIP has been envisioned as a platform for a broad range of student work, including original research and critical essays as well as reflective pieces, reviews, and interviews. It aims to be accessible to first-time authors, and the managing editor and advisors have implemented mentoring opportunities such as drop-in office hours and author workshops. Providing this support network is an important means of helping to mitigate feelings of imposter syndrome as well as the common perception that "research by librarians and archivists is not 'real' research" (Doucette & Hoffmann 2019, 18).

Too often, scholarly communication and, especially, scholarly publishing are conceptualised in impersonal and transactional terms that do not take the human and relational aspects of the process into consideration. It is even less frequent that the affective dimension of publishing is openly discussed, even though it is a notoriously anxiety inducing process for authors at all

points in their careers. The feelings of anxiety and vulnerability associated with “putting yourself out there” through publishing are felt all the more intensely by the MLIS students that ELIP works with, who generally have not had experience with publishing, come from a broad spectrum of academic and work backgrounds, and who, in many cases, hold preconceived and limiting notions about who can and what can be published. For instance, during the last call for submissions during the fall of 2019, ELIP’s student editor noted that a number of students she spoke with thought that submissions should only be about academic libraries or other “lofty” topics and, therefore, assumed that their work would have no place within the journal. Ultimately, many of the authors who decided to submit work only did so after having multiple discussions with the editor about the publishing process and their work and thereby establishing the requisite sense of safety and trust in ELIP’s processes and editorial structure.

The roles of kindness and empathy within LIS are increasingly being examined, and these issues certainly do not fall outside of the realm of scholarly communication. Recently, Dali and Jaeger (2018) have written on the importance of the human aspect of peer review and have discussed “peer review as a space for relationship and community building” (100). We are excited by this refocusing of the discussion around publishing and peer review and believe that it is important for ELIP to both model and encourage students to think about this sort of community-oriented and empathetic approach to scholarly communication. Therefore, we emphasize “kind reviewing” and collegiality in the editorial stages and we strive to provide students with support and mentorship throughout the overarching publishing process. By establishing an infrastructure that puts as much care into the publishing process as it does the end result, ELIP offers students a rich experience that, we hope, will inspire them to continue putting their voices and ideas “out there” and advocating for open, inclusive, and kind scholarly communication.

### **3. ELIP and Experiential Learning: Bringing Together Theory and Practice**

In acquainting student authors with the review and revision processes, ELIP has created several experiential learning opportunities for other students in the program. For example, students in the Scholarly Communication and Open Access Publishing course serve as ELIP’s peer reviewers. They practice providing constructive feedback on the shorter reflective pieces, reviews, and interviews before conducting formal reviews of article-length submissions. ELIP relies on a relatively traditional double-blind peer review process facilitated by the student managing editor, and the course instructor teaches students about peer review best practices. However, the course also situates this work within a critical theoretical framework to help students develop an applied understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of blind peer review, which will enable them to make informed decisions about their own publication decisions as well as to advise others on theirs. Additionally, the student reviewers gain an appreciation for the amount of work involved in peer review, and many begin to question why peer reviewers are not compensated for this service.

Production activities afford another experiential learning opportunity for students in the course as well as others in the program who volunteer to participate. With an emphasis on quality control, students conduct fact and citation checking as well as copy-editing. Similar to the peer review process, this helps to demystify the behind-the-scenes work of publishing that is often taken for granted. The time-intensive nature of the production activities also opens students’ eyes to the

fact that high caliber online-only publishing requires a significant amount of editorial support and is not simply a matter of uploading author accepted manuscripts to a publishing platform. Students who engage in these activities will, when in the field, have a realistic understanding of the resources required to support student and faculty journals or launch an academic press.

#### **4. Conclusion**

MLIS programs have a responsibility to both prepare students to actively engage in the profession as scholars and provide sufficient scholarly communication training to aspiring academic librarians. As noted in the “NASIG Core Competencies for Scholarly Communication Librarians,” “Variety is the only constant in the job duties of SCLs [scholarly communication librarians] and responsibility for the full suite of competencies is beyond the reach of even the most accomplished librarian” (NASIG 2017). This work will become increasingly dispersed as more academic libraries re-envision themselves as not just content providers, but also producers of content. Opportunities for librarians to lend strategic direction to campus-based, academy-led publishing initiatives will continue to grow in number as well as scope, and MLIS graduates should be equipped for high profile roles in this changing landscape.

It is not unusual for MLIS programs to include coursework that addresses the objectives of the open access movement and its two dominant models (green and gold), as well as some of the drawbacks of commercial publishing. Additionally, several MLIS programs, including the iSchools at the University of Toronto and San José State University, support student-run journals, which can go a long way towards nurturing emerging scholars. However, Western’s approach is unique in that it is grounded in a concerted effort to integrate theory with practice. By creating numerous opportunities for practical engagement in the scholarly publishing process and integrating ELIP’s workflows into the curriculum, Western’s model is intended to familiarize as many MLIS students as possible with a praxis-oriented approach to scholarly communication.

#### **Reference List:**

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- Doucette, L., & Hoffmann, K. (2019). Conceptions of research among academic librarians and archivists. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 5, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v5.30417>.
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